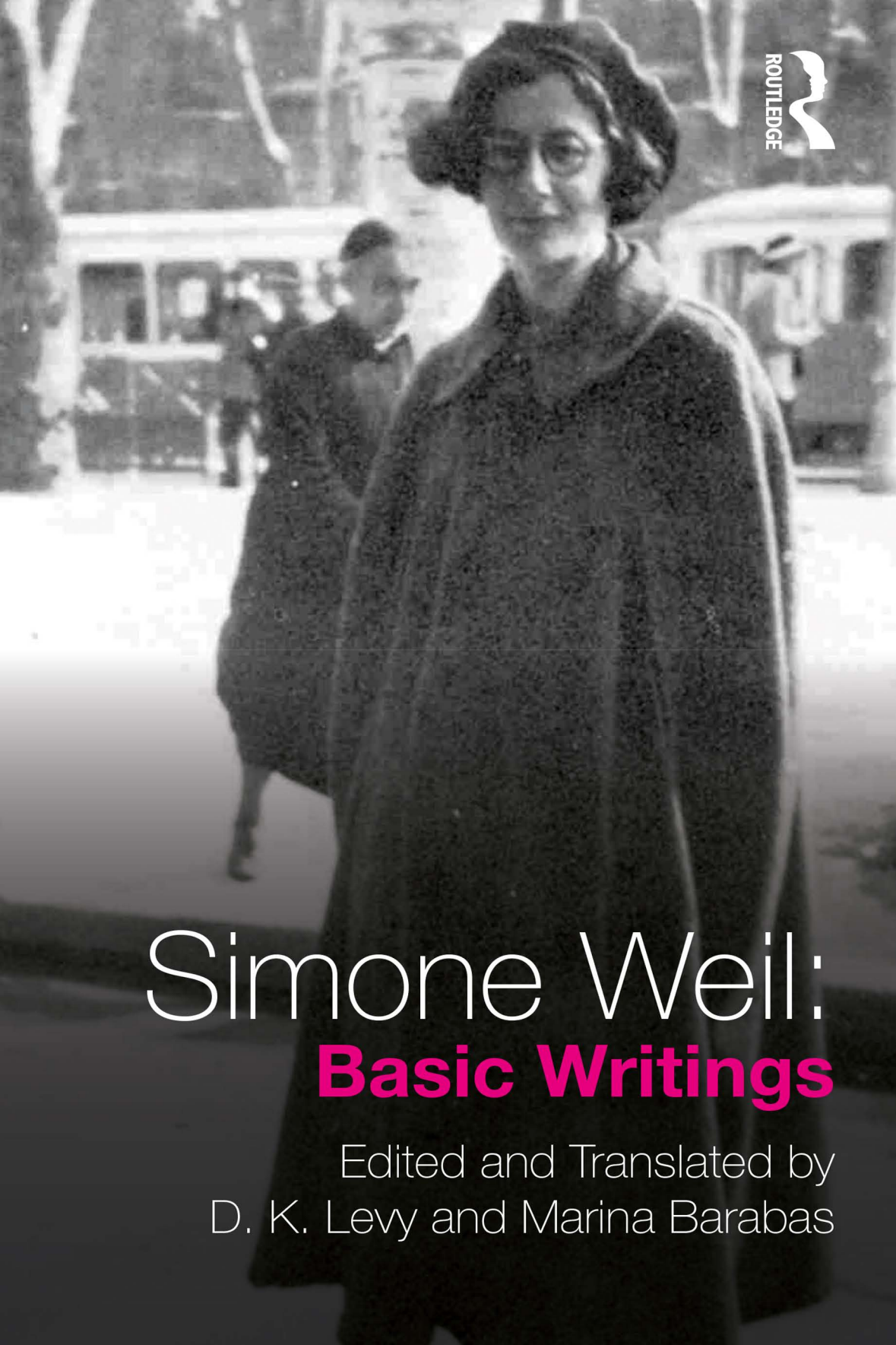

Simone Weil:
Basic Writings

Edited and Translated by
D. K. Levy and Marina Barabas

Simone Weil: Basic Writings

Simone Weil is one of the most profound and thought-provoking thinkers of the 20th century. A teacher, factory and farm labourer, a political activist at home and abroad, a loving friend, daughter and sister—all these manifest a life devoted to the good in its many forms. Her writings explore the good open to us and the various routes to it, spanning philosophy, politics, science and spirituality. While she saw her vocation primarily as a philosopher—examining questions concerning human faculties, action and thought, the limits of language and our need of mediation, suffering and beauty for contact with reality—her startlingly original thought is often obscured by her having been too readily categorized as a Christian mystic.

Simone Weil: Basic Writings is an expertly edited anthology of Weil's most important writings, presenting her philosophy as it relates to the architecture of human nature, politics, work, necessity, beauty, goodness and God. Working from the definitive French edition of Weil's complete writings, D. K. Levy and Marina Barabas have translated the essays anew or for the first time, adding important notes and references absent from existing English language editions of Weil's work.

Following an extensive introduction that gives an overview of Weil's life and thought, each part opens with a short preface situating the selected essays within Weil's oeuvre.

Simone Weil: Basic Writings provides an excellent entry point for Weil's philosophy, as well as a reference for students and scholars of Weil's thought in philosophy and related disciplines.

Simone Weil (1909–1943), a profound, original and influential thinker in the 20th century, was a political writer and activist, and a formidable philosopher. Her best-known writings appeared in English in *The Need for Roots* (1952), *Waiting on God* (1951) and *Oppression and Liberty* (1958). Albert Camus saw her as "the only great spirit of our times".

D. K. Levy is a Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, UK.

Marina Barabas, having taught philosophy in London and Boston, is now a fellow of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

'Suffering through years of misrepresentation, Simone Weil finally receives the careful editing and philosophical translation she deserves. David Levy and Marina Barabas have crafted the ideal entry point for those looking to engage with Weil's ideas in English.'

Nicolas Bommarito, *Simon Fraser University, Canada*

'In her meditations on justice and violence, hope and despair, greatness and humility, the natural and the unnatural, and power and human helplessness, Simone Weil has given us a philosophy for all times, but one that is especially timely in our present crises. For this thoughtfully chosen selection from her work, and their careful and learned commentary on it, Levy and Barabas deserve the gratitude of us all.'

Sophie Grace Chappell, *Open University, UK*

'These fresh translations do justice to Weil's prose, a window aspiring to transparency like Weil's life itself. Attention, too, is focused on the rigor of Weil's thinking, rooted in the ideal world of Plato and mathematics, while never abandoning the "real world" and the need for a universal justice to uncover its beauty. If the beauty of mathematical science did not reflect the beauty of the world "the real world would be like an ugly body in beautiful clothing", wrote the great logician Kurt Gödel. As this collection demonstrates, Weil would have agreed.'

Palle Yourgrau, *Brandeis University, USA*

Simone Weil: Basic Writings

Edited and Translated by
D. K. Levy and Marina Barabas

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Raimond Gaita, with gratitude.

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Introduction

WEIL'S THOUGHT

1. Simone Weil was first and foremost a French thinker. Her thinking, which was her life's labour, is her legacy. The thoughts she produced give the legacy its value and a summary of the main lines of her thought follows.

Weil gave herself the task of doing the intellectual work to conceive the form of a just society. Therefore, a central pillar in her legacy is the conception of justice that animated her mature thinking, particularly in its departure from a more familiar conception with which she began. Her conception of justice is marked by its antagonism both to democratic individualism as the status quo basis for politics and to the primacy individual rights have come to enjoy in our political order. For Weil, justice demanded more than the security needed for self-fulfilment. It required nothing less than an unending vigil of care for the needs of every person. A justice of pragmatic accommodation was, she thought, unfit for creatures who could know and desire good. The central place she gave justice in the constitution of human life, along with her effort to think through what making justice actual would demand, make her conception of justice bracing. To conceive justice as Weil did is to see what we venerate as justice today as a plastic icon.

A second pillar in her legacy is made from elements in her complex picture of human freedom. Even more so than her conception of justice, Weil's

conception of the limits upon us as beings formed by the possibility of seeking good is as unsettling as it is potent. Her account of human freedom is in comprehensive opposition to the prevailing idea that people are agents charged with acting to create a better world or responsible for supporting people to realize their life's aims. Instead Weil emphasises the possibility of, and the requirement for, active non-action by means of attention, consent and love. Rather than lauding the autonomous individual who realises their goals, Weil promotes the need to obey, to consent in spite of oneself to what is real rather than what we wish. We do not, according to Weil, make the world orderly; we recognize the order that is already there. Obedience to it combined with humility can produce a genuine freedom. Around this picture of human freedom is a frame of dialectical thinking that affirms, Weil believes, the necessary and unchanging cosmic order which alone makes intelligible the human purposes for which freedom is required.

What these two pillars in her thinking support is a conception of human beings and human life that is at once optimistic and a consolation against pessimism, because it affirms that human beings can have imparted to them a direction toward their own perfection and, therefore, the prospect of some progress toward it. The core of Weil's thought is that in all human life, each person has an urgent need for what is good, and that need will only be met in the end by justice for each one of us. Integral to the content of Weil's thought is its serious tone. Weil is arresting in part because she demonstrates what it is to take the good, and justice, and each one of us, seriously. Justice is not for her confined to a desirable outcome to which we give due consideration while plotting the course of our social, political and economic developments. For Weil justice is the pole star around which everything else should be reckoned. For that reason justice never appears as a formless abstraction, one perhaps used as a cudgel or justification for whatever high-minded cause is *au courant*. To avoid this, justice must have roots in what is material and real. Human life consists in large part of work, and work occurs in discrete and concrete ways of life. Thus no real justice can be realised without thinking through its application to work and the human milieu in which work is performed. Weil's thinking at its most abstract never loses sight of this human reality. Work, as much as justice, is a touchstone for Weil—a touchstone with which to tie her thought to our world.

Alongside these two pillars in Weil's thinking there is also her remarkable reading of Christianity, a reading whose influence and notoriety has

been widespread and long-lived. Like the two pillars of her thought, it is unorthodox—so much so that in many Christian denominations much of Weil's reading would be plain heresy. Whatever truth or significance attaches to the charge of heresy, the importance of Weil's relationship to Christianity cannot be doubted. She was drawn toward Christianity by disparate factors. One was its familiarity, because she thought it was the native language of spirituality for European civilisation. Another was her conviction that Christianity at its best was the perfection of the Classical Greek spirit she revered. For these reasons, she also believed that a restoration of the Christian spirit to European civilisation was one sure route to Europe's salvation from the spiritual torpor and decay evident in the first part of the 20th century, itself the rotten fruit of unwise seeds sown in the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Though Weil disdained the ideas of the resurrection, heaven, and hell, the crucifixion of Christ was for her an image, perhaps supreme, holding a key to the truth of our human situation. Finding the meanings in the crucifixion provided Weil a bottomless well for her thinking and an inspiration for her personally.

It would be a mistake though to think of Weil as an essentially Christian thinker, even more so a mystic. Readings and elaborations of Christian ideas are a considerable part of her notebooks and some of her essays are concerned specifically to refine those ideas, often with remarkable probity. However she also found her inspiration in other sources, including the folklore of many cultures and the spiritual thought of India and China. Christianity and Christian ideas are probably not essential for the possibility of expressing her thinking—she thought many of these ideas pre-dated Christianity. Christian ideas are absent from some of her writing and many of the ideas she develops and presents do not depend on accepting Christian claims for their cogency, either those that are canonical or her own. Indeed, Weil was trained as a philosopher, and her thought never shrouds her intellectual formation. The questions which frame her thinking are often philosophical and the framework upon which she draws to answer questions is most often philosophical. With enough of her writings laid alongside each other, a metaphysical and epistemological foundation emerges that is undeniably that of a philosopher.[1] It is also undeniably indebted to Plato.

1 The essays "Essay on the concept of reading" and "Morality and literature" are straight philosophy essays, one analytical, the other phenomenological.

In consequence, one further intriguing part of Weil's thought is her development of a Platonism for the modern age. Though Plato is not the sole philosopher to influence Weil's thinking—Descartes, Kant and Spinoza's philosophies play their parts—Plato's influence is unquestionably primary.[2] Weil also takes over from Plato his Pythagorean influences as well as ideas from the original Greek Stoics who are Plato's historical successors. Weil goes as far as to augment Pythagorean mathematical ideas with subsequent developments in mathematics right up to the 20th century, especially number theory. She also relates Greek science to contemporary science, finding an essential unity through homeostatic systems and natural laws as functions that inscribe relations between quantities or magnitudes.[3] What emerges is a metaphysical framework that is not presented as an antique curiosity but as a candidate for being true, one that is compatible with advances in scientific thinking. Weil was not one for academic or philosophical speculation; her aim always was to find the reality or truth in our human situation.

Just as Plato did, Weil's framework begins with the natural aspect of reality that enters into the content of our sensory experiences and empirical beliefs. It is what we see and touch and measure. Behind this tangible aspect are those elements in reality that structure our experience, without being a material part of that reality. These elements appear in descriptions using mathematics, or geometry, or the language of scientific laws. While not natural in the way that measurable things are, these elements are not unconnected to nature nor unconnected to human thinking. Yet behind these elements—which act as intermediaries between thought and nature—Weil follows Plato by positing something separated from nature, something outside it, just beyond the natural limits of ordinary human thought, yet still real. This she calls the supernatural. It is where the fundamental order of reality originates and is latent in whatever *must* be so such that there *can* be descriptions using mathematics or scientific laws. The supernatural is the ultimate order, the form of the beauty of the cosmos she might say, and that idea of good on which the very possibility of human thought depends. It is no wonder therefore that Weil sometimes thinks we would be as well to call this reality God and, sometimes, to

2 For example, an essay nominally about the 11th-century Occitanian civilisation as the perfection of Christian thinking pivots crucially around a quotation from Plato. See "What does the Occitanian inspiration consist in".

3 See the discussion in "Concerning the Pythagorean Doctrine".

conceive it as such. As will emerge, this fundamental reality and the possibility of contact with it is a foundation for Weil's thought.

WEIL'S FORMATION

2. Weil was active for scarcely 12 years before her premature death in 1943 at the age of 34. She left behind published articles, manuscripts and notebooks which have been the wellspring for the posthumous publication of her thinking. Educated in philosophy, she claimed philosophy as her vocation until her last days, and teaching philosophy comprised most of her employment. When Weil wrote for others, her thinking always shows her philosophical formation and is thus marked by careful distinctions in experience, in concepts, in language and in the relations between ideas.

Weil was born in Paris on 3 February 1909 into an assimilated Jewish family with a comfortable social and financial position.[4] Her father was a successful doctor. She had one brother, André, older than she, who would become one of the pre-eminent mathematicians of the 20th century. Simone and André were from an early age prodigiously intelligent, successful in school and lifelong polyglots. She attended the Lycée Henri IV, one of the best secondary schools in Paris. There she was marked by the influence of her teacher, Émile Chartier, who was well known as a public philosopher under his main pseudonym, 'Alain'. After graduating, Weil won admission to arguably the most competitive and prestigious university in France, the École normale supérieure (ENS) in Paris. She was one of a handful of women to study at the ENS at that time. She completed her studies in 1931 with the award of her university diploma. The diploma permitted Weil to attempt, and to pass, a selective civil service examination, the *agrégation*, which in turn secured her a state job as a qualified philosophy teacher. She would return to this job on and off until the start of 1938 when she took an extended leave on account of ill health, later forcibly extended by the outbreak of war. But at the end of September 1931, Weil took up her first assignment as the philosophy teacher of a girl's school in Le Puy, a small city in south-central France.

4 There are several biographies of Weil but perhaps the most illuminating is by her friend Simone Pétrement, *Simone Weil: A Life*, translated by R. Rosenthal (New York: Schocken Books, 1988). Many details here are drawn from this volume.

It is helpful to set out Weil's intellectual posture in 1931 as a benchmark for gauging her subsequent development. Most evident was her concern with justice which, at age 22, had been an abiding concern since at least her early teenage years and would remain her focus until the end of her life. She was well known at the ENS for her affiliation to the cause of workers and trade unions and those aligned with them like the communists. Beyond the ENS, she participated in marches, demonstrations and in the debates about the strategy and vision for a different French future. To pursue justice at that time meant to seek a change to the social, political and economic order in France. One that would eliminate oppression. In part the aim was to ease the hardships endured by workers, especially factory workers and agricultural labourers. In part it aimed to reshape government to pursue the well-being of all citizens, rather than the well-being of only the middle-classes, industrialists and bureaucratic elites. A feature of the socio-political situation was the contest matching the strength of the workers and the reformers against the strength of the industrialists and the state. The workers' aim was to disrupt the existing order to produce conditions that would oblige the replacement of the old order with a new order. It was not anarchist; they were fighting for a new order. Weil had absorbed from her teacher, Alain, that the virtues of the citizen were obedience and resistance. For obedience there must be order, otherwise there is no liberty; but resistance is needed to prevent order from becoming tyrannical and snuffing out liberty.[5] The challenge was, as always, to conceive and construct a new order that makes justice actual.

At this time, Weil was marked intellectually by Alain's ideas. Alain believed that one must accept without further concern that which cannot be changed, that is to say what lies in the cosmos, in the nature of reality. For anything else, anything that can be changed, he believed that the change must be occasioned by the exercise of one's own will. That the universe is an indifferent place that will offer succour to none of us was a kind of credo for Alain. Each person is in this sense alone. It is each individual's will that discriminates the order in every experience, dividing this entity from that, that event from the other, lending to experience a coherence and a direction, until reality takes on a familiar, continuous and consistent character. That is order. Alongside the order imposed on experience, the values by which each individual lives also lay in the gift of the will. For Alain, it is in the light of the values established by the will that someone makes sense of why he acts as he does,

5 Alain, *Elements d'une doctrine radicale* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Francaise, 1933), 281.

by underwriting as worthwhile, as it were, the purposes that he happens to pursue. That is, we give ourselves our values. Years before Sartre, Alain taught, in effect, that existence precedes essence; and it is essence under the guise of order that one creates by means of the will, albeit within the cosmic confines discerned by the intelligence. It is a conception of individual freedom with few intrinsic limits. In the fight for justice, the will must therefore be the origin of the new order that will secure justice. Alain's emphasis on the will was in an important sense the starting place for Weil's early thinking.

In a way consonant with Alain's ideas, Weil argued in her undergraduate dissertation, "Science and perception in Descartes", that intelligence, consent and work are what is central to human life. Her ambitious dissertation sought to extend, on her own terms, Descartes' famously indubitable assertion that "Cogito ergo sum" or that "I think, therefore I am". Weil observes that Descartes' assertion would not by itself be enough to make the whole of our human being indubitable because we are creatures with a will, creatures who *act*. The required addition to Descartes' *cogito* should express something of the form "I am able, therefore I am" (*Je peux, donc je suis*). The one thing, she continues, which the "I" is able to do indubitably is consent. More precisely, I am always able to refuse, in any experience whatsoever, to accept as actual what seems to be so. It could seem as if there were an oasis before me, but I am always able to refuse to accept that this is so. That is the limit though, and in refusing to accept that it is so I do not consent to accept—let alone to assert—that it is *not* so. I am not *able* to make it so, or vice versa; my consenting or refusing to accept that it is so does nothing to alter whether it is so or not. Colloquially speaking, I *can* always doubt the evidence of my senses. Weil describes it as our one pure freedom. The power to refuse, which is the other side of consent, is a power to act insofar as it is something one *does*, about which one can be indubitably sure one is doing. Having been done, it might affect what one will do next. Moreover, it is an action of ours that cannot be required from us by how things seem to be in the world nor how they do not seem, because the action is not one that is answerable to how the world is. It is a response to appearances, not a judgement that the world is one way or another.[6] For all that, it *is* an action, on which there are no conditions, so

6 In logical terms it is an action whose logical commitment has the form of a tautology ("How things seem is neither the case nor not the case".) and therefore performing an action is compatible with however the world happens to be.

it is unconditionally free. As our primal ability, when one exercises it, one's own being is thereby indubitable, according to Weil, to the one who acts.

In her dissertation, alongside this unconditional freedom, Weil placed necessity. Necessity, like justice, would become a lifelong focus for Weil's thinking. At this point though, she conceived necessity, following Descartes and contemporary science, as that network of natural laws that governs the whole of material existence. Thus whether the will achieves its aims in the material world is conditional on necessity: I may wish to jump two metres into the air, but whether I can or will is conditional on natural possibility and necessity, e.g. gravity, mass, muscular strength etc. Doing anything in the material world would seem to require an accord with necessity, for nothing happens in the material world but in accord with necessity. So Weil, following Descartes, gives the role of negotiating an accord with necessity to the intelligence. It is for the intelligence to fathom necessity and fashion an arrangement that works. No doubt this process will be ongoing as the intelligence methodically uncovers more and more natural laws, with greater and greater insight into their interactions. Weil was then elaborating Descartes' natural philosophy as set out in his *The World* (*Le Monde*) and the activities of the intelligence on the model Descartes described in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (*Regulae ad directionem ingenii*). Success in the task given to the intelligence would be for the will to make a slave of necessity by learning how it worked so as to yoke it to the achievement of one's purposes. These purposes included for Weil those in the most elementary perception. For example, awareness of the trajectory a moving object must follow permits anticipating its destination, or enables changing position so as to keep it in view. Similarly, intuitive knowledge of leverage or explicit knowledge about pulleys makes possible the realisation of purposes quite impossible through only the direct application of muscular, human strength. At the limit, these purposes surely could include building a hydroelectric dam, for example, using the knowledge of physics such a thing requires. What these purposes all have in common is that they are, for Weil, kinds of work. Theorising about work was something Weil had been pursuing since her association with Alain.[7]

By work, Weil at this time understood something that is always indirect. Work is not the purpose of our actions but always instrumental to some

7 See her 1929 student essays "De la perception ou l'aventure de Protée" and "Du Temps" in *Oeuvres complètes*, volume I, pp. 121ff, 141ff.

purpose with its own end, rather than an end in itself. Seeds are sown for the crops that will grow, and the crops are grown for food, food that will be consumed. The products made in the factory are made to be sold, for the revenue they will bring to the company, for the wages that will be paid to the workers. Even simple perceptual observations are made not for their own sake but for the purposes that will be served by having seen the object observed. Work, understood as constituted by a series of actions, always makes use of tacit or explicit knowledge the intelligence has obtained about the regular behaviour of matter, which behaviour is regular because of the natural laws and necessity that make it so. Work is methodical and instrumental because this knowledge is used. Work with a shovel depends on tacitly knowing that the ideal point of leverage is between the collar and the blade or that a firm heel applied to the step of the blade drives it into the soil furthest. These are the methods for work with a shovel, itself a kind of lever. They are what the intelligence has learned about how matter behaves. The actions by which we accomplish our purposes are therefore indirect insofar as they are always accomplished by a method, and the method always makes use of the necessity inherent in matter. It is as if we are dancing with necessity, doing the dance of this method or that, in order to move toward realising our purposes and ends.

With her philosophical grounding set out, it is possible to sketch what Weil thought the fight for justice would entail. A new political order must be conceived and created that would result in justice. To become actual, the political situation in France had to reach a point where replacing the old order with a new one was a solution all parties would see as inevitable or at least better than the alternatives. That was the practical aspect, which would be won by action on the streets and at the factory gates. But there had to be a theoretical aspect too for the new political order had to be created. It would not just emerge, for example, by ceding power to the workers or turning everyone into a worker, not least because difference, hierarchy and authority are inevitable structures in a complex society. The new political order had to deliver better wages, better working conditions, better relations between labour and management and perhaps industrial restructuring as well as genuine participation for all citizens in the conduct of the affairs of government. In other words, to produce justice it had to be effectual. To be effectual, the methods by which it would do so had to be invented, as with any purpose, as with all work. Inventing the methods meant learning what was possible,

impossible and predictable in the behaviour of the matter making up an economy, a government or a labour force. This was a theoretical labour Marx had begun, but it would have to be finished by someone. So in addition to conceiving a new *political* order, there was a need to do the intellectual groundwork for a new conceptual order with new distinctions and for the values that would make sense of, orient and lend meaning to human life in contemporary circumstances. This last task, as Alain had indicated and as Weil at this time agreed, should be completed by means of the will in conditions of absolute freedom. Weil's labour of thought for the cause of justice had thus begun.

WEIL'S LABOUR OF THOUGHT BEGINS

3. In the last quarter of 1931, Weil began teaching philosophy; she continued the struggle for justice in its practical aspect through action locally and nationally, and in its theoretical aspect she began to make a study of the reality of the state of the workers' movement in France. She began with hopeful prospects about what was possible. The discoveries and events of the next three years would darken most of those prospects, starting the change in Weil's philosophical outlook that would crystallise by 1937.

Outside her teaching job, the milieu in which Weil involved herself was a melange of local politics, trade union branches and national trade union organisations as well as Marxist, communist and socialist fellow travellers involved through their engagement with politics. Nominally they all had the same aim, which was justice and improvements for the working classes, who were the majority of the French people. The unions were the inheritors of French syndicalism, that trade union movement whose roots lay in the guilds and companies of tradesmen, organisations whose lineage was medieval. While the history of workers' movements in France was long, their organisations had come to be suppressed until the latter part of the 19th century when industrialisation had required their relegalisation. Renewed and changing rapidly to keep pace with changes in manufacturing, the workers' movement was further roiled by the infusion of 19th-century revolutionary ideas. It was a confusing melee and quite often ineffective.

The main reason was infighting within branches, unions, trade union organisations and within the larger movement. Individuals and groups

jockeyed for position or derided and undermined the efforts of their would-be compatriots. When they had unity, industrial action could be effective, but it was rare. A lot of energy was expended seeking unity. This had the effect of turning organisations inward to concern themselves with decision-making processes, internal structure and allocations of authority rather than outward toward the workers and their antagonists in industry. In this way, activist organisations became increasingly bureaucratic. A second reason for conflict among parties were genuine divisions in the aims and ideologies of the movement. These divisions were bound to prove divisive. The General Confederation of Labour (CGT in French) had relatively modest goals, such as collective bargaining for better pay and conditions, on the one hand. While on the other, the communists allied to the Communist International ultimately sought to replace the French state with a Soviet-style republic en route to no state at all. These are not small divisions easily bridged. Indeed, the divisions point to a third reason for the infighting. Many in the CGT would have been French patriots as well as proud members of a particular trade in which they had served their apprenticeships. This was a source of pride and fraternity, as well as the origin of much collective identity, and both of these provided the cohesion and camaraderie necessary for fighting their perceived enemies. Though it was an effect of mass psychology, it was nevertheless a powerful boon to the struggle, but it brought its own stultifying consequences as loyalty to the group usurped the place justice or the plight of the workingman (and woman) had in their hearts. In turn, this entailed real limits to the solidarity a French patriot could have with a French communist, or a skilled metal worker with a farm labourer. So the movement in which Weil spent her time in the early 1930s was inherently fractious and riven by division.

In the late summer of 1932, Weil spent almost two months in Germany which had the best organised and most powerful trade union movement in Europe. She was in close contact with the movement as it confronted the surging fascist opponent embodied in Hitler's inaptly named National Socialist German Workers' Party. There were running street battles between the supporters of the fascists, the socialists (of the Social Democratic Party) and the communists. The socialists and the communists sometimes took

to fighting each other.[8] Much of the public were apathetic. Weil quickly observed that however organised and strong the German workers' movement had been it would be no match against the fascists, their industrialist backers and the conservative elements in Germany. It was a natural and logical step to judge that the French workers' movement, less strong and more divided than their German counterparts, would similarly be no match for the gathered strength of those standing against the workers' movement in France and widespread apathy. She realised that the time for a proletarian revolution had not arrived. She set out her analysis of the situation in an extended article, "Prospects. Are we heading for the proletarian revolution?" published midway through 1933. The proletarian revolution, Weil averred, could not be delivered up to the workers: They had to win it for themselves. This they could do only when their skill in manual labour was combined with the skill in intellectual labour needed for envisioning and bringing about the revolution. Those few in the movement who had reached the point of having both skills should be protected for when circumstances became more propitious. As for those who were supporters of the movement, they had another task, which was to *think clearly* about a future just society. Weil concluded her article as follows:

> If, as is only too possible, we are to perish, let us see to it that we do not perish without having existed. The formidable forces that we have to fight are preparing to crush us; and it is true that they can prevent us from existing fully, that is to say from putting the mark of our will upon the world. But there is one sphere in which they are powerless. They cannot prevent us from working toward clearly *conceiving* the object of our efforts, so that, if we cannot accomplish that which we will, we may at least have willed it, and not just have desired it blindly; and secondly, our weakness can in truth prevent us from prevailing, but not from comprehending the force that crushes us. Nothing in the world can prohibit us from being lucid.[9]

8 Weil wrote about this in "Let's not start the Trojan War again".

9 Simone Weil, "Prospects", in *Oppression and Liberty*, translated by A. Wills and J. Petrie (London: Routledge, 1958), 23, translation altered, my emphasis; also in *Oeuvres complètes*, volume II:1, 281.

Taking this task to heart, Weil began in 1934 to write what she would call her first magnum opus, the extended essay, "Reflections concerning the causes of liberty and social oppression".[10] It was a comprehensive examination of the current socio-economic-political moment in France. In part it critiqued and repudiated the Marxist analysis, which had been an early inspiration to Weil. In part it contained a clear-eyed sketch of the structure of society and its dynamics. Notable among these were those factors that served to confound clear thinking. The cultivation and maintaining of social prestige in particular threw an obscurantist veil over the reality of how power was acquired, used and maintained. Almost a third of the essay was devoted to an analysis of the systemic factors that inevitably produced oppression in any society with a hierarchy of power protected by a veil of prestige. She posited that the logic of power was such that no amount of power could ever be sufficient. Therefore the quest for power was endless and so too the insecurity of those with the power. For those in power had always to fear revolt from those who were under their power and therefore needed enough power to keep them at bay. They had also to fear their peers, foreign and domestic, who might at any point seek to subjugate them to secure their own power. No person, by himself or with the aid of technology, could secure invulnerability against his fellow. So if he has power and is to keep it, he must always add to it. In this, Weil was echoing a Platonic trope that possession of limitless appetites was an undesirable and painful condition, because instead of the unending pleasure of limitless consumption, there would be an unending hunger with no hope for relief by satiety. Thus, for any society in which there is a hierarchy of power, which in any but the simplest economic systems there must be, oppression by those with power was the inevitable outcome.

The analysis in "Reflections" was of a far wider scope than in "Prospects" and so too was its pessimism. The latter article, confined in its scope to the prospects for the success of the workers' movement, made clear the weakness internal to the movement, much of it due to a weakness in its motives and its inadequacy relative to its aims. "Reflections" by contrast argued that any modern industrial society has to become an arena for the contest for power. This would be so for as long as the weaknesses in people's motivations

10 S. Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1958), 37ff.

generally remained as they were. As with "Prospects", Weil thought the only hope lay in clear thinking. If only we could apply our intelligence to the natural forces at work in the world, including upon society, thereby becoming more rational, only then might we become free of the enervating motivations that immiserate society. But the prospect of this triumph by the intelligence in liberating our conduct from its base motivations was, she concluded, an idle ideal or an idyll, one very distant from present reality.

Weil finished "Reflections" by December 1934 after months of hard work. She was satisfied with this interim result of her labours and considered it a comprehensive synthesis of her thinking about justice, work and human nature up to that point. That self-appointed intellectual labour now done, she began work on a new practical project. Disappointed with the workers' movement, it was no longer enough for Weil to think and theorise about the work done by the workers. She needed to experience that work for herself.

Drawing from life

4. She obtained a leave of absence from teaching for the academic year 1934–1935 and sought work in a factory. Given her evident social and educational background, obtaining such work would not be easy. She hardly looked or sounded the part. A friend intervened on her behalf with Auguste Detoeuf, the managing director of the French company Alsthom, and she started an entry-level job on the factory floor doing piecework at an Alsthom factory in Paris on 4 December 1934.[11] She worked in the factory until early April, apart from two short periods when she was laid off. A week after leaving Alsthom she obtained, without assistance, another job in a heavy industrial factory. The work was very hard for Weil whose constitution had been fragile since childhood. She was also unusually physically maladroit. In addition, she had long suffered with terrible headaches and had already been on two weeks of sick leave from Alsthom owing to an inner ear infection. She did not last working the heavy industrial machinery and was fired from her new job in less than a month. Throughout her factory work she lived solely on her factory wages in a garret. In early June she obtained a new position in a Renault factory at which she worked until she left on 22 August 1935.

11 It was to the ideas of Detoeuf that Weil was responding in "Concerning syndicalism 'single, apolitical, mandatory'".

She had worked about seven months out of nine, all of it on the factory floor. Later she would say that it was here that she first discovered affliction (*malheur*), a condition into which a person can fall, which would become pivotal in her later thinking. So much of her factory work was piecework under the pressure of quotas for production that she was struck by how even someone with her background had quickly become mindless under the relentless pressure of the passing of time. The new science of management, called Taylorism after its founder F. W. Taylor, had at its heart the relentless optimisation of workers' time and movements.[12] After the abstract intellectual work of "Reflections" she had indeed moved in earnest to another extreme. The work had hit her hard, something she recorded in her intermittent factory journal. It had felt to her like slavery and she had felt herself a slave, branded, working under the imagined lash of overseers who told her she was slow and inept every day. Though she would take up a new teaching post in October 1935, beforehand she was completely exhausted and left for a month-long holiday with her parents in Spain and Portugal. While in Portugal, she had the first of the religious experiences she would later cite as having been important to developing her heightened religious sensibility. Listening to a procession of Portuguese women, wives of fishermen, in a small village she was enchanted by the plaintive and beautiful quality of their religious song. She had then the sudden, certain realisation that Christianity was *the* religion of slaves, that slaves could not help but belong to it, and Weil counted herself among the slaves.[13]

The headaches with which Weil had suffered in varying degrees for her whole life were now particularly difficult and by Christmas she found herself unable to continue in her teaching post. She would not return to another lycée teaching post until October 1937. The sporadic work she did during the first half of 1936 included agricultural field work on a farm for the month of March. The year 1936 proved an eventful one. Increased trade union activity culminated in large strikes in May and June, resulting in immediate legislation with many significant concessions to workers. Civil war broke out in Spain in July 1936 after a failed coup d'état by conservative

12 Her reactions against Taylorism form a central thread in her later thought about work, evident explicitly in "Precondition of non-servile work".

13 Weil recounted her spiritual journey is in a letter published as "Spiritual Autobiography", in *Waiting for God*, translated by Emma Craufurd (New York: GP Putnam's Sons, 1951), 61ff.

and fascist elements of the Spanish establishment against the left-leaning government of the Spanish Second Republic.

By early August, Weil had inveigled her way into Spain posing as a journalist but intent on joining the fight. By mid-August, she found her way to the front lines though she was untrained and as maladroit with a rifle as she had been with factory equipment. During the week she spent near the front line, Weil was at genuine risk from the enemy. However, she burned her foot and ankle badly after she inadvertently stepped into a pot of hot cooking oil that was kept at ground-level to conceal it from the enemy. She was evacuated eventually to Barcelona where her father was able to provide her with competent medical care until their departure at the end of September. Her injury was severe enough that she was granted medical leave of at least three months by the Ministry of Education, which she later extended to the end of the school year. Though her stay in Spain had been less than two months, of which only a fortnight had been near any military action, the time spent among soldiers in a country at war had a considerable effect on her. She observed first that once social order has been wrecked by the use of violence, the remaining limits on human restraint were few. She was witness to the fact that it had become as easy to kill a child or a priest as it was an enemy soldier. Second, once formed into a collective 'we' against a collective 'them' the individual humanity drained as quickly from the perceived 'them' as the demand to sublimate one's human individuality to the collective 'we' grew.[14] Any patriotism for a collective, she concluded, is a great catalyst for brute force. Third, under these conditions, strength alone determines all. When strength is possessed over another, it must be used; and when one is under it, it must be suffered. This was, as it were, the natural law of barbarism. Weil had seen this before in its earlier description by Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*.[15] Once within the domain of natural law or the laws of matter, killing became natural, even automatic.

14 Weil warned of the danger of drowning one's individuality in the collective in different ways in "Prelude to a declaration of duties toward the human being" and "Is the human person sacred?"

15 The central passage from Thucydides is quoted in several essays in this volume, e.g. "Are we fighting for justice?"

Weil's transition in thought

5. Weil remained involved in the workers' movement right up to the start of the Second World War. However by 1937 her thinking was in transition on account of the ideas and experiences she had got in the preceding six years. Her philosophical posture had shifted and the germinal form of her mature thought was growing inside her. The most significant change was a move away from Alain's conception of the will so violent that it almost inverted his position. Instead of the will originating order in the world, Weil had come to think the will could at best be an aid to the emergence and growth of order in human life. Rather than *make* order, our role is to *recognise* it. The revisions to her conception of justice, the role of the intelligence and work's import in human life were no less significant. A new addition was her understanding of how humans suffer, as well as the extent to which they are prey to brute psychological forces that alternately blind and bind. Taken together, Weil in 1937 had a philosophical posture very different to that with which she had begun 1931.

Weil's attention had become drawn to what workers suffered, to what being a worker felt like, more than the inequity in their circumstances. Her prior aim had been changes that would improve pay or working conditions or the structure of industrial production and its place in the political order. However, these changes would not alter the mindlessness engendered by factory work or manual labour, nor the humiliations workers felt, nor the insecurity, nor even the essential boredom in their work.[16] Fulfilling the demands of the workers' movement would not remedy these ills. Indeed, behind these somewhat familiar ills she had discovered a more profound form of suffering that she would call affliction, which affected not only the most burdened workers but also others who through misfortune or the indifference of others had fallen into it. Someone afflicted is in a nearly omnipresent condition of pain and confusion while at the same time feeling socially diminished to a point where they think they are irredeemably worthless.

Justice would therefore have to comprehend more than fairness or pragmatic accommodation. In addition to a cognisance of suffering, justice would have to comprehend that work is the medium in which a person's

16 She discussed the sufferings of workers that would not be remedied by better working conditions in "Concerning syndicalism 'single, apolitical, mandatory'".

life occurs, like an animal's place in its ecosystem. Work is central to meeting human needs. It is also a vital source of ownership, of belonging, of values and of purpose. Even more, work is the medium by which people relate to each other. Justice therefore is not about an equal share but about needs and obligations being met within an order structured by work.[17] We are uniquely, Weil thought, beings who work; work is not to be avoided; instead the activities within life and work must be combined to become the substance of a human life. More, the substance of life would also have to be fit for creatures who were not unique only because they work but also because they have purposes, ends and a requirement for good.

Before, Weil had thought it the job of the intelligence to work out the ideal combination of life and work, along with the best methods for realising that combination. Methodical action in all things called for the intelligence. The intelligence would discover what was possible and expedient once the limits of necessity had been found. More generally, Weil had thought people were improved by becoming rational, mixing intellectual with physical labour. She now thought, however, that the reach of the intelligence was far more limited. Moreover, it was not adequate for providing what people need, which is not more methodical action. People need not just knowledge but inspiration, even hope, to move them. The divisions that had riven the workers' movement were born of motives that were low and so widespread as to be all but universal. The descent into unrestrained violence in Spain was almost natural, like the necessary result of the loss of inhibitions and the laws of mob psychology. The intelligence on its own was inadequate for leashing these passions. These forces would need a different neutralising agent.

The role Weil, under Alain's influence, had assigned to the intelligence was to find the borders of necessity, of that which was unchanging. Within these borders, the intelligence mapped the dynamics of the natural laws governing matter. These dynamics were, in the relevant sense, what was real because the will could make use of them to realise ends. Necessity *itself* could to that extent be ignored. It was the material dynamics that mattered. But by 1937, Weil had come to realise that this was the wrong picture, almost the

17 A just society being centrally oriented around the place of work is the main thesis of Weil's later book-length essay whose beginning is extracted in "Prelude to a declaration of duties toward the human being".

negative of the true picture of reality. Instead, it was necessity itself that was real and the dynamics of matter were just an aspect of necessity. Contact with necessity itself, now as ultimate reality, was possible, Weil thought, but not through the intelligence. Direct contact would have to take forms other than theories or discursive description. Contact must be indirect. Indirect forms of contact were afforded by images, practices, even through the activity of work. Necessity contained the truth about our existence or, better, the key to the truth about our existence. Removed though it was, Weil had come to think that necessity would have to play a role as the immediate object of our understanding of the circumstances of human life.

The change that crystallised in Weil's thinking in 1937 overthrew her prior picture of our circumstances and how to address them. In the old picture, the circumstances of human life, though bounded by necessity, were produced by human wills, singular and collective, through the order that they imposed on the world. This order was on one level practical and political, one whose form was the social, political and economic structures where power was vested. On another level, it was metaphysical, through the order—sometimes in the guise of an essence—we gave to existence, especially through our conceptions of the laws of matter and our values. In this picture, the intelligence was everywhere at work, either through discovery or by producing effective methods for action. Based on this knowledge, the will conceived change in the order of things and, adopting the new conceptions, made it real.

In the new picture, order is not always imposed; sometimes it is recognised. Weil's new thought was that there is an order that can be revealed, latent, through direct contact with reality, under the right circumstances. That contact was with a higher, metaphysical order, the order of existence itself. This order neither changes nor evolves; it is unchanging, like necessity, because it is the form of necessity. Of course, for us there is still methodical action, which still depends on harnessing necessity and is still counselled about matter by the intelligence. In that way political, social and economic institutions are made. But for inspiring them, rather than an arbitrary will, they should take inspiration from reality, in truth, from the higher, unchanging order. If human needs are to be met, Weil thought, if we are to attend to human suffering, to place work where it belongs in human life, then it is to an inspiration from the real, higher order to which we must become receptive. For that order is a good one because without it there would be

nothing. In addition, Weil thought it was the image of a just order because it was the image of supreme and all-encompassing concord in the cosmos, rather than a discord of disordered flux. Therefore, Weil thought, to seek justice in the most complete sense, we will not impose an order but rather learn to recognise it before cultivating its materialisation in the institutions and practices of human life.

To refine the idea of the higher order, Weil makes a distinction between the natural and that which is beyond nature, the supernatural. The supernatural implies no witchcraft or anything similar since mathematics and the necessity central to science are supernatural for Weil, because they are not themselves material. Indeed, the supernatural is that which is immaterial and therefore, in an attenuated sense, escapes material necessity. This attenuated sense recalls Weil's claim in her dissertation that the refusal to accept as actual what in an experience seems to be so also evades necessity and is therefore unconditionally free, i.e. undetermined. In 1937 too, there is for her something in a person that is unconditionally free, what Weil calls the supernatural part of the soul. And, consonant with consent, it is the part that can welcome the higher order, that can consent to necessity when it recognises the order whose form is necessity as the ultimate order. To consent means to take that higher order in the guise of necessity as the basis for the exercise of the will; in other words, it means to obey, often even obeying from love for it. Under this inspiration, overcoming low motives and natural laws of psychology becomes possible—may even become automatic—and thereby the forces that birth conflict can become inert. This overcoming is proved possible by the fact, as Weil sees it, that sometimes, it is actual. Sometimes someone who has the upper hand stays their hand, or someone who is struck a blow keeps the blow, letting go the impulse to retaliate. This singular fact, rare but ubiquitously attested, was, for Weil, a kind of proof.

At the end of May 1937, on holiday in Italy, Weil had the second of three experiences she described as contacts with "catholicism that really mattered". Weil was alone in a basilica in Assisi admiring its pure beauty, when she was overcome and felt compelled to drop to her knees. The third contact, in 1938, this time in the Benedictine abbey in Solesmes, France was the most profound. The abbey was known for its Gregorian chant. She had been suffering for days from painful headaches and had sought relief in the abbey, listening to the chant. At some point she had an out-of-body experience during which her pain disappeared and she felt euphoric joy

and, in that moment, she believed she could imagine how one could love divine love while in the harsh grip of affliction. Much later, after this experience had shaped her thinking for years, she wrote that she felt that the thought of Christ's final suffering ("the Passion") entered her for good that day. While still in Solesmes, her meditative recitation of the 17th-century poem "Love (III)" by George Herbert assumed for her the quality of prayer. She later wrote that at some point during that recitation she felt that Christ himself had come down and taken hold of her. These experiences intensified Weil's affinity with Christianity. After this point she made much more use of Christian language and metaphors and began to seek a Christian persona for herself. She also returned to her labour of thought, once again set on clearly conceiving the form that justice could take in the world here below, with a new philosophical posture and all the ingredients of her mature thought.

HUMAN BEINGS *CHEZ* WEIL

6. Weil's distinctive description of human beings is a good entryway into a survey of her mature thought. Every moral philosopher, overtly or covertly, offers an account of what human beings are and of what makes them moral subjects. Each philosopher posits which motivations, which modes of thought, which limits to the will are possible; how authoritative someone can be about their mind, motives or intentions; and thus the reach of self-regulation. Upon these posits rest the sense in praise and blame, admiration and pity, and much else that we reserve for moral subjects and not for animals. For this reason, disagreement in moral theory is often a proxy for deeper disagreement about human beings. But for there even to be a disagreement about morality, the place of the good must at least be in question, and part of that question concerns a human being's relation to good.

Weil's foundational claim is that, whatever else, human beings have an exigence for good.[18] An exigence is a requirement, not quite a need; it is an urge or a pressure sometimes felt as urgent that when unaddressed augurs a certain distress. This exigence, even when addressed, is recurrent and shows in the way human actions make sense minimally, always, as

18 Weil puts it this way in "Study for a declaration of obligations to the human being".

an advancing toward some good. Weil claims that a person's movement toward something only ever has two causes. One is the need for it, and the other is that a good is seen in it.[19] A need is felt like pain or being in want of something and any movement toward a balm or a gratification is automatic (as is the repulsion from what rouses a pain or a want). By contrast what is seen as good needs no other motive force, because the good is magnetic; we are drawn to it directly, unless we are held back, for that is the nature of good. Weil means by this that, absent some confounding factor, no one is indifferent to what they recognise as good: so recognised, it is always motive.

The exigence for good is an aspect of the supernatural in us. Weil means that the responses the exigence evokes are not of a kind with animal behaviour. They are not responses awoken by bodily stimuli. The good is not the goodness in something material like warmth or shelter or nutrition, which when wanting leads to death. If it were, it would be a need, not a good. You cannot make, possess or consume the goodness itself. It is in that sense immaterial, as symmetry is.

The exigence for good and the magnetic quality of good are joined in the idea of a purpose. A purpose is more fulfilled the more it realises the good toward which that purpose is directed. We might say that the criterion for fulfilment of a purpose is whether the good of it has become actual. If a knife is a good one by how it cuts, then my purpose in making a knife is more fulfilled the better it cuts. The idea of a purpose is thus internally related to the good of it. Purposes need a good that is sought, for a purpose without any good in it is not a purpose at all. Without a good, a human's doing is at most a movement produced by an ability. To see this, observe that actions need purposes. Without them, human doings are just movements of the body sometimes accompanied by effects, just as a sneeze sometimes expels an irritant from one's nose.[20]

So, adjacent to Weil's foundational claim about the exigence for the good is Weil's conception of humans as purposive.[21] Each human purpose has

19 See Weil's discussion of friendship in "Forms of the implicit love of God".

20 The thought that sneezes have evolved to have the purpose of expelling irritants has no bearing here, since the impersonal "purposes" of reflexes or evolution are not the actions of persons.

21 One place Weil discusses this at some length is "Precondition of non-servile work".

an immediate object to be achieved toward which one's practical abilities can be directed. This object has a quality of purposiveness, that purposiveness which relates the purpose's object to the good in that purpose. It is in this sense that humans are purposive beings: They act to achieve the good in their purposes. The object of a purpose is often another purpose, in which case the first purpose is intermediate or instrumental to the second purpose. In that case, the first purpose is fulfilled by, and dependent upon, how it realises the second purpose and its good. For example, something is produced, so that it might be sold, so that wages may be paid, so that profits might be distributed, and so on. So while the product produced is the object of an initial purpose, the ultimate object of the purpose is the profit from its sale.

However, Weil adds, the goods in actual purposes are always derivative and incomplete realisations of the *idea* of good, that idea of the intrinsically motivating. Each good a purpose has as its object is *intermediate* insofar as it is a means to the ultimate good that cannot be realised by purposive action and thus remains necessarily short of its ultimate purpose. A few considerations underwriting this thought, which is Platonic in origin, can be sketched. One consideration is that any material good, any worldly arrangement of matter, is good only relative to some conditions and not others. It is in this sense conditional or contingent. For example, a medicine is good when used to treat the right disease, in the right dose, at the right time and so on, otherwise it may be a poison. The existence of these conditions shows that it is not good intrinsically but is only contingently so, viz. when it serves some anterior good. In the case of a medicine, we might say that the anterior good is prolonging life. But similarly there are times when prolonging life—as with the terminally ill—is no kindness. In that case, whether prolonging life is good or not will depend on some other anterior good, such as kindness. And so it continues until all that can be *said* of the anterior good in question is that it is unconditionally good or that one simply sees the good in one's purpose. But if the anterior good is unconditionally good then it cannot be a state of affairs realised by purposive action since human actions only ever alter states of affairs and these, as established, are only ever conditionally good.

Indeed, when one considers that any worldly state of affairs considered good can always be imagined in circumstances where that state would no longer be considered good, it becomes clear that any worldly good is

only contingently so. Poverty in one setting can just as well be bounty in another setting. The idea of good, of what is truly good, is not the idea of what might be realised as a matter of happenstance. This later consideration can be amplified by noting that everything that happens in the material world happens only in accordance with the laws of matter. These laws are indifferent to the good. There is no tendency inherent in matter to produce good. As it were, what happens, happens, of necessity.[22] And our freedom, according to Weil, is solely that of consent or refusal. We have no power over what happens of necessity. This point is developed further in the next two sections.

There is a further sense in which the idea of good, the idea of an ultimate, unconditional good must be logically prior to any one person's conception of it. The birth of purpose, of purposive action, is not something that can be discovered as an element like copper can be discovered or revealed by experiment. To have a purpose is already to have thought of it under some anterior conception of the good, that which is itself the explanation for being moved by the purpose. The implication is that no person can be an *original* source of an independent good in a purposive action that might be realised by that purposive action, for to see it as a purpose, as purposive, as having purposiveness is already to make use of the *idea* of a good which is unconditional.[23]

On this basis, Weil believes that all purposive action must, in the end, be directed at the ultimate good, for all the other goods in purposes must be dependent on an ultimate good. Regardless of the formulations in the logic and metaphysics of actions and purposes, common sense vindicates this conclusion. Few people doubt that some things are good and real independent of whether anyone wanted them to be so. Kindness is an example. Kindness is not thought good simply because people think it is so; they recognise the good already in it. So Weil is pushing this thought a step further by adding that every instance of a good akin to being kind is a species of a single genus, the good.

Someone can think himself into discord with common sense by thinking that what is good is only good because someone wants it to be so, that they can make it their ultimate purpose. That was Alain's idea, that the will

22 Weil discusses the limits of materialism in "Is there a Marxist doctrine?"

23 Almost the same point is made using the concept of value—which is directly linked to the motivation for an action—in "Some reflections on the concept of value".

originates all values.[24] Yet whatever reality one such value enjoys, it is dependent, like their shadow, on the one who willed it, and when they cease to be, so that value ceases to be. Weil, by contrast, means to insist that however we look upon the good in being kind, it has a different nature than that good that is so solely on one's own authority or by dint of willing that it be so. The difference is in their independence and thus the extent to which each is real. The type of good in kindness—independent good—can alone meet the exigence for the good that Weil conceived as foundational.

THE ESSENTIAL CONTRADICTION IN HUMAN LIFE

7. Weil, having made the exigence for good the very essence of human beings and having thus structured human activity by purposes and the good intrinsic to them, then situates us in a world obstructive, even antagonistic, to this exigence. She wrote in 1943:

> The essential contradiction in human life is that man, whose very being is the straining towards the good, is at the same time subject in his entire being, in his thought as in his flesh, to a blind force, to a necessity absolutely indifferent to the good.[25]

Weil thus raises the problem posed by the fact that each person is made of flesh and blood, neuron and synapse, which is to say mere matter subject to natural laws or necessities. Matter, wherever it is, behaves according to these laws. It could not do otherwise, and so seemingly neither can we. Every movement, every thought, will be the one it is according to the necessity sovereign over matter. Moreover, this sovereign necessity is, Weil says, blind and indifferent to good, which is to say that in what it necessitates there is no purpose, thus it has no purposiveness nor any relation to the good.

The problem this poses is simple enough. Necessity, lacking purpose or any connection to the good, does not move our constituent matter toward the good nor therefore toward fulfilling the exigence for it. Indeed, Weil

24 "One must believe in the good, because it is not; and in justice, for example, because it is not. Not believe that it is loved and desired, for that adds nothing to it; but believe that I will make it so". Alain, *Morceaux Choisis* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 278 (my translation).

25 "Is there a Marxist doctrine?" MS 309–310.

claims the form necessity takes in the human mind is an omnipresent disposition for personal expansion until it is stopped from doing so—that was the lesson of Weil's time in Spain. The salient sense of expansion is given in terms of possession, ingestion and dominion or, more generally, having more. When the disposition to expansion is at the expense of other people, the contradiction in human life Weil posits has its equivalent, she avers, in the contradiction between justice and force. That is, justice can never issue from force.

Thus every person's situation is an exigence for good (or justice) that is immobilised by the indifference to the good inherent in necessity (or force). Weil is to a large extent a philosophical determinist who would all but deny that we have free will. To that extent, the necessity that produces motion—mental or physical or otherwise—in someone has no relation to the constantly motive exigence for the good. For Weil though, there is a further, insuperable obstacle to satisfying the exigence for good even if we had free will. This obstacle is that the good cannot be directly sought, caught or made.

This insuperable obstacle already featured in the previous section in Weil's considerations for thinking that the idea of good cannot be realised in something worldly and that therefore all purposes aim at some ultimate, independent good. To be clear then, the good is not a material property, like weight. If a block weighing 20 kilograms is split down the middle, then the weight is divided evenly into each half. That is how it is with a material property. If I place two objects symmetrically and then carry one off, I do not carry away half the symmetry, because the symmetry is not *in* the parts. Similarly, when I am kind to two people instead of one, the kindness is not twice as great. The good, like symmetry, like kindness, is not a material property of anything. But it is real, as are symmetry and kindness. Since it is not to be made from matter, neither is it to be sought in this world, at least not directly. It is true that purposive action has its good, but since it is always intermediate or a means, the good it can realise is never the ultimate good.

If one is to move toward the good to which our exigence responds, Weil thinks, the approach must be indirect, using our only true freedom, the only one that escapes material determinism, which is the power to consent (or to refuse). Rather than seeking the good, one must become sensitive to it, so that one becomes aware of it in its immaterial form. If one can become aware of it, one can consent to it or not. Consenting to the good is our contact with

the good, a contact that begins to satisfy the exigence for good. Moreover, making this consent more complete and more pure, is cultivating the contact with good, nurturing it, increasing it by, as it were, letting the consent grow. As the consent to the good grows, the more the exigence is satisfied. Indeed, the form that consent to the good takes, Weil calls love: We consent to the good through love. This consent is increased by subduing those aspects of ourselves that inhibit consent, such as fear, such as the satisfactions got from other desires or the misunderstood distortions of one's exigence for good such as pride or glory. The analogy with love is illuminating since love, after all, is concerned with the beloved, not the concerns of the one who loves.

A further analogy for what Weil means by becoming aware of the good or sensitive to it lies in the idea of becoming attuned to something. Someone can become more and more attuned to middle C such that he can continue to hear it distinctly even as a cacophony increases. In consent, the more a person becomes attuned to good, the more he does not hear anything else, the more his attention is then held fast to the good, until perhaps he hears nothing else.[26] Then his consent to and love for the good would be complete.

From this Weil takes it that increasing consent requires increasing purification of the self and all that inhibits the consent to the good. Purification means the removal of material impurities which Weil associates with the self, the person, what the 'I' calls "my own", that is to say what I call me. These impurities inhibit the consent to the good, indeed early on they can inhibit awareness of the good. Purification means abandoning those aspects of one's person to which one is attached—e.g. pride, vanity, imaginative phantasy—that inhibit consent to the good. Consenting to the good includes, for Weil, allowing oneself to be changed by it. For example, humbling oneself diminishes one's person in the sense of diminishing selfishness or vanity. Attending to what is other than oneself is turning away from one's person. At the limit, pure consent to the good is pure love of the good. A pure love would exalt the good by sublimating oneself to it, by being willing to give anything for it—or, consequently, having nothing of one's own but it. The image of this love Weil sometimes paints as that of

26 Weil's most concentrated discussion of attention is in "Reflections on the good use of school studies with a view to the love of God".

someone waiting by the door, waiting, motionless, for the least hint of that which is loved.[27]

The process thus outlined illustrates how through consent, humility, attention and love the good can become more internalised and thus the exigence be further satisfied. The more the good is internalised, the more the personal has been purified away, has been negated. And that very same negation also has the effect of negating the movement outward, the movement of personal expansion. It is not then that one has become perfected and now can and will act only for the good. The world is still ruled by necessity, thus what is done is still determined, but to the extent that personal expansion has been arrested by consent to the good, the good one does in its place is now automatic.[28] Moreover, what does happens will now be changed by the real fact of a consent to the good—as refusal of the good too would show itself. Whatever does happen, it will happen as necessity dictates. Nonetheless, Weil insists that in what one does one is free to do it in slavery, by refusal or in obedience, by consent. And this difference between refusal of and consent to what will of necessity happen makes what was done different in reality, and therefore the effects in reality from what was done will be different. For example, what is done with patience is not what is done without it, and the one to whom it is done will feel that difference and will in his turn react differently to what has been done. Generalising, the same thing done in obedience to the good is different than doing it in despite of, in refusal of, the good. The difference may be slight, but Weil frequently points out that a slight difference can make *all* the difference in the right circumstances.[29]

So while Weil believes human beings are placed in a situation antagonistic to what she has claimed is their essential being, she believes the fate of men is not a pessimistic one. The fundamental contradiction of human life can be resolved. Necessity and the good can find a unity, and force and justice can find an equilibrium. However, the equilibrium in justice achieved by subduing the forces behind personal expansion is not an equilibrium achieved by specific actions or from purposes having justice as their good. Rather, it

27 An image like this one is developed in "Theory of sacraments".

28 Weil's striking claim is developed throughout her work but is laid out most clearly in the sub-section "Love of one's neighbour" in "Forms of the implicit love of God".

29 See for example "This war is a war of religions".

is negative action, realised by self-negation, by consent, humility, attention and love that cultivates and nurtures good and the worldly forms of the good like justice.

NECESSITY, GOOD AND GOD

8. This survey of Weil's mature thought has thus far had two focal elements: the good and necessity. Each is a crux in Weil's thought. Good is essential to a human being: It is part of what makes humans more than animals by making them purposive beings, which purposes aim for good. Necessity is the cosmic mechanism of existence: It moves what happens, without any purpose or good.

Following Plato, Weil believes that the contradiction between necessity and good on the level of existence becomes a unity at a higher level, beyond existence, beyond nature, on the level of the supernatural. Necessity is in one sense our ultimate reality. Each person has a contact with necessity in every moment; our actions and experiences depend on it. Nonetheless, necessity is not the good; however, it is under the guise of necessity that one can become aware of the good. The good is the other side of necessity, the side that is immaterial, beyond nature. That is the nature of their unity. If we can become aware of their unity, then necessity can become, by our contact with it, a contact with the good.

Weil's idea, initially strange though it is, is that when we consent to the good we do so by consenting to necessity. That is *how* we consent; that is to say necessity is the object of our actual consent. Actual consent to necessity will show itself in various ways. For example, one who has consented will not resent his fate. Indeed, when the consent to necessity becomes love of the good via necessity, then a pure sense of this would be expressed in not wishing one's life were any way other than it has been. This is a kind of Stoic thought.

It is on the elaboration of these thoughts that the form Weil's thinking takes divides into two distinct branches. In one branch, Weil gives an explanation in terms that make no reference to God. In the other branch, the elaboration of her ideas are given in a religious language in which the concept of God, the person of God, is focal. The first branch is Greek, Pythagorean and Platonic—and, Weil believes, scientific.[30] The second branch is

30 This is the focus of "Concerning the Pythagorean Doctrine".

Christian.[31] Both try to give words to the supernatural unity of necessity and the good.

In common for both is that experiencing natural beauty is a perceptible form of necessity that hints at the good behind necessity, because the beauty in the cosmos that necessity makes and sustains is experienced as magnetic. That is to say, beauty is by its nature something toward which we are drawn, just like the good. Just like the good, beauty itself is not a material property that we can possess (even if we can possess beautiful things). Beauty seen on the cosmic scale is seeing the beauty of the cosmos, perhaps finding it wondrous that anything should exist and even that the cosmos and its beauty should persist forever, seemingly. Experiencing the beauty of the universe as beauty on the cosmic scale is what Weil calls supernatural joy.

On the Christian branch of elaboration, supernatural joy is an awareness of God's divine wisdom as expressed in the providential design of the universe, which design is enacted by necessity. So on the other side of necessity is God and his goodness, evident in his design. We become aware of necessity by the beauty of the universe, and because beauty is itself evidence of a purpose, of a divine plan, we realise that the other side of necessity is the author of necessity, that is God. So when we consent to necessity, we are consenting to God; we have taken the step toward the love of God.

On the Greek branch of the elaboration, supernatural joy is an awareness of an active, cosmic principle by which the universe comes to be, comes to be beautiful, and persists in being so. It is an awareness of a cosmic sine qua non, that without which there would be nothing. This Weil takes to be the good, or in Plato's sense the form of the good, the form of which everything must partake to be what it is. We become aware that necessity is the form of or the actualisation of this sine qua non on which existence and the beauty in existence depend. So when we consent to necessity, we are consenting to the form of the good; we are taking a step toward the love of that on which everything depends, viz. the good.

Weil envisions two routes to an awareness of necessity and of what lies on its reverse face, as well as to the consent to and love for this other side. The first is supernatural joy. The second is affliction. What supernatural joy

31 While Weil's notebooks are filled with reflections on Christian ideas, they are given definite form in "Forms of the implicit love of God" and "God's love and affliction".

and affliction have in common is that each aids the negation of the personal which stands in the way of consent to the good, through necessity. Supernatural joy does so by showing how everyone and everything fits into the cosmic order that is beautiful; thus, regardless of one's personal individuality, each is no more and no less than like one drop of water beside all the others in a cosmic ocean.[32] Affliction, by contrast, does so by tearing away by force all that contributes to the sense of being a person without the least animus or justice, without purpose.[33]

Like the experience of beauty, affliction is an actual experience, the name for which Weil conceived by seeing the experience of those doing piecework in factories, those subjugated by colonialism or slavery, those made to feel like an object in a conveyor belt system of justice and many others who suffered chronic pain, mental numbness and social degradation. As Weil conceived it, extreme affliction is a condition with neither despair nor hope, thus it seems endless and outside time. The one afflicted no longer expects anything from anyone and is bereft of consolation. The loss of self is completed by the awareness that what has happened is purposeless, the mere play of necessity, or the results of misfortune, indifference, and perhaps wrongdoing motivated by nothing better than the mechanical desire for more. Weil notes, echoing Spinoza, that wrongdoers are like loose roof tiles blown from a roof and falling to the ground.

On the Christian branch of elaboration, affliction is an experience that makes one aware of the absolute and complete absence of God from the material realm of existence. There is neither divine intervention nor divine justice here below. So complete is God's absence that, according to Weil, it is the sign par excellence of his presence on the other side of necessity, because it shows how God had to limit himself by binding even his own being to the other side of necessity, so as to make possible a genuine existence for us, with the consequence of precluding any intervention by God. So if one can manage, in the depths of affliction, to consent to necessity by seeing it not as tormentor but as guarantor of God's existence, by finding conviction regarding the sacrifice made from love through which our being has been

32 The role of beauty is discussed at length in the subsection "Love of the order of the world" in "Forms of the implicit love of God".

33 In "God's love and affliction" Weil elaborates the nature of affliction at length toward a subtle theodicy.

and continues to be, then one makes contact with God and one can love God through the contact with necessity, even in affliction.[34]

On the Greek branch, the experience of affliction makes brutally clear that there is no purpose in the operation of the cosmos, that there is no fundamental teleology. Indeed, the substance of the cosmos, we might say, is revealed to be difference and flux: a nothing-ness of inconstant change. But even in affliction, when this truth is most evident, the cosmos, in the guise of necessity, persists in its appearance as a place of order, as the indefinite myriad is formed into things, some alike, some not, some more so, some less so, all interacting in a concord that never falls into disarray. The active principle of the cosmos is the other side of necessity and it is a principle of harmony, fitting together what is not alike in such a way that they become enough alike that they form the concord of the cosmos. If one can see oneself in this concord, then even in affliction one can see that one has a place in the cosmos, that, whatever else, one is a part of this harmony. It is to this that one can consent.

On the other side of necessity, on both branches, there is an active principle that is creative insofar as it is why there is an ordered reality of the cosmos. The form of this principle we encounter—its face—is necessity. The principle itself is described differently on the different branches. On the Christian branch the principle is God, or more precisely God's love, because Weil believes the most sense we can make of God is that God is pure love, pure loving. God's unfathomable, pure love is why God, who was and could be all, limits himself in order that we might have a real, independent being of our own. It is in this sense that his self-limitation creates us. On the Greek branch, the active principle is whatever gives to the formless a form such that they can compose a harmonious concord, much as a waltz transforms a crowd of individuals milling about into a harmonious movement of each within a whole. Weil may mean this as a philosophical claim that such a metaphysical principle must be posited to explain the evident order of the universe. She may instead mean it as a claim about the inter-relation between the world as an intelligible order and those who are capable of finding it intelligible, i.e. those with minds, apart from each other, yet capable of having thoughts in common. Each interpretation of Weil's thinking is

34 Weil often elaborates on the indirect or implicit forms of love that the distance between man and God implies, especially in the sub-section "Implicit love and explicit love" in "Forms of the implicit love of God".

possible; not least because each is a possible interpretation of Plato's thinking of which Weil's thought is an elaboration.[35]

What then is the relationship between the Christian and Greek elaborations in Weil's thinking? For Weil, they are different but not incompatible. One reason for their compatibility is that as a matter of history she believed Greek thought contained the spirit of Christian thought *in toto*. She believed that the best Christian thought was the perfection of Greek thought.[36] Another reason for their compatibility is that Weil thought each was true: that is how things are. However, a truth as difficult to conceive as the basis for the cosmos—particularly for we who are constrained to exist somewhere at sometime in the cosmos—would need more than one elaboration as a *support* for directing the mind toward the reality of which this truth speaks. The Greek elaboration would do for us, as would the Christian, because each provides a language native to Europe. Other civilisations would probably need their own language. Science too was a language native to Europe and Weil was certain that a science pursued without prejudice to the spiritual could also, eventually, give a formulation of the same truths expressed by the Greeks and Christians.[37] For this reason, Weil was no mystic, if by that is meant someone who imagines that truths might be delivered in a flash or in some ecstatic state. Her thinking, the thought of a philosopher after all, advances in phalanxes, with claims marching in step with arguments and conceptual clarifications coming up behind. After all, her thought was the product of the intellectual labours she pursued without stop. Weil thought there could be no progress toward awareness of the truth about the cosmos that did not come from contact with reality. The contact and the progress must however be supported by all the tools of the intelligence too, such as language, metaphor, and contradiction, as well as disciplined studies of the world, such as by means of geometry or sociology.[38] Weil sometimes called Plato a mystic philosopher because he maintained that one must transcend

35 Though here too one often encounters a Kantian strain in Weil's thinking that seems to want to retain the idealist "Copernican Revolution" in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, while retaining Plato's dialectical, realist metaphysics.

36 It is a claim she makes at length in "What does the Occitanian inspiration consist in".

37 Her understanding of science and its relation to history and to spirituality appears in "Reflections on quantum theory".

38 Weil warned about the dangers of ungrounded thought in "Let's not start the Trojan War again".

the personal for contact with the reality of the good. In this sense of mystic, perhaps Weil was one too.

JUSTICE RE-CONCEIVED

9. At this point in the survey of Weil's mature thought, humanity has been placed against a background picture of the cosmos. In that picture, Weil has moved from the regularity and order seen in the world to the fundamental necessity underlying that orderliness. She describes that necessity as the form of an active principle in the universe that is the basis for the origin and persistence of the universe as an ordered whole—a cosmos. In Christianity, the principle is God's pure and perfect love. In the Greek tradition, the principle is harmony, by which unalike things fit together. Weil's idea is that when one consents to necessity, one consents to internalise this active principle, thus becoming obedient to it. More precisely, when one has consented to good in the guise of necessity by removing the personal elements that hinder doing so, one internalises the active principle of the universe—in a relation Weil names as love. The more it is internalised, the more it will become evident in what one comes to do. That is automatic: For as far as it has been internalised, that far does one in obedience to it re-enact the active principle. In this way, one participates in an infinitessimal way in sustaining the ordered existence of the world.

That cosmic conclusion is somewhat distant from an order for society with a justice fit for those who need the good. After all, Weil's lifelong labour of thought begins and ends with justice. But as we have seen each person can internalise the cosmic principle and thereby bring it into human life, the life of people which is the locus of justice. In short, her idea is that real justice is realised to the extent that people internalise the cosmic principle. That is to say that the cosmic principle gives rise to an order whose form here below, when realised in the lives of people, is that of justice. Of course, given the crooked timber of humanity, perfect justice may remain an ideal limit or model for justice in practice. Nonetheless, Weil is a gradualist insofar as partially internalising the cosmic principle will produce partial change in what one does. As a rough analogy, following half the Highway Code is better for traffic than no regard for the Code. One has only to add that for Weil, unlike the Highway Code, one must never give up the movement toward complete justice in favour of the pragmatic accommodation of other considerations.

Weil gives a down to earth definition of justice: Justice obtains when people's needs are met. This is justice because it is the real fulfilment of the one obligation Weil thinks we have to others. Our one obligation to others is respect. This obligation is, she believes, the only one we will feel if we recognise and reflect upon that others are, like us, moved by an exigence for the good. The only real or material form that respect for another can take *in action*, on Weil's view, is seeing to it that their needs are met. Everyone, she thinks, feels a tug of obligation when confronted with someone in perilous need. As she puts it, no one will turn from his door someone half-starved when he has food aplenty already. That is where the empirical proof for the obligations she asserts begins. Whether something is a need is, for Weil, a matter of fact; one more or less established on the observable basis of whether the lack of something tends to kill. Weil was clear that we have bodily needs as well as needs of the soul, such as the need for security as well as risk.[39] Life without any security or life without any risk destroys the human spirit equally.

Government can of course seek to meet the needs of its people and even were it to succeed, this might only be what Weil calls natural justice. It might be justice according to the letter of the definition, but not supernatural justice, real justice, unless it emerges from the spirit of respect for one's obligation toward others. For the form of supernatural justice, the ideal of justice, is a love for one's neighbour (*charité*). The image of this ideal is someone in need receiving help for what they need with a charity that does not demean but rather elevates the recipient to a semblance of equality that is counter to actual fact.[40] As an illustration, the strong helps the weak in such a way that the weak is made to feel equal in strength to the strong. This image of justice is itself the image of God's love or of perfect harmony, i.e. the cosmic principle. In this image of charity there are two focal elements. First, the one who gives, though having every advantage, does not take advantage when he could. He treats as a fellow someone he could just as easily overlook or dominate for his own ends. That is, he does not act out his natural urge for personal expansion. Second, acting as he does entails, however temporarily, the quiescence of personal, motive forces: desires, self-deceiving escapism,

39 The needs of the soul are set out in the extract from "Prelude to a declaration of duties toward the human being".

40 This is the crux of the discussion of the sub-section "Love of one's neighbour" in "Forms of the implicit love of God".

phantasy, prestige, social recognition etc. Thus his giving as he does is the manifestation of the cosmic principle internalised.

What is at work in this image of justice is seeking consent when someone is in no position to refuse. They are in desperate need, thus enervated and at the mercy of others. By meeting their need, removing the peril, one removes them from the mercy of others, thereby restoring the necessity of seeking their consent or taking account of their refusal. This is an elevation from where they were; it restores their autonomy and in so doing restores them as a fellow. That is justice; the unalike are made to be alike. For Weil, at root, love of one's neighbour is wanting them to have the autonomy that makes their consent or refusal as significant as one's own.

There is indeed something supernatural in this because nothing that can properly be called consent can be given by an animal. (Talk of refusal, e.g. when a horses 'refuses' a jump, is inert if nothing counts as consent, viz. when the horse jumps it does as it was trained or according to instinct, not because it consents.) Put another way, wanting to restore the autonomous capacity for consent or refusal is wanting to give someone a say in how things are, making what someone says something of which one must take account. The endpoint in this is accepting that someone is a limit, a real limit, a limit in reality, to what one can think or do. Harmony would then be thinking the same way, while being distinct, neither appropriated by or under the dominion of the other, as in a friendship. That is why this bearing towards others is the bearing that transforms natural justice into supernatural justice.

While it may seem—and it has seemed to some—that Weil got lost in a seemingly religious diversion into the origin of the cosmos, the connection to justice is never lost in Weil's thinking. Strange as it may sometimes seem, Weil also always has in mind what the larger picture means for how human beings live and for how individual human beings suffer and thrive. Justice is the best we can hope for here on earth; the mistake Weil uncovered and diagnosed in her pre-1937 thinking—and in prevailing thought—was believing that the principles of justice are earthbound. The fruit of her intellectual labour was the recognition that justice is not achieved through an order that minimises the conflicts in people's desires while maximising the satisfaction of those same desires. The supernatural notion of justice, true justice as Weil would have it, must be the model and inspiration of our earthly institutions of government. There is, in her view, no legitimacy a government could

have other than that it is just, no matter its democratic virtues, the rights it secures for citizens nor the fairness in its distribution of resources.[41] For this reason, its institutions must be so constructed so as to enable on the one hand natural justice and on the other nurture the conditions for the growth of supernatural justice. The same constraints that Weil thought precluded the individual, direct pursuit of the good are also insuperable constraints for the direct pursuit of the good by a collective body like a government. In fact, they are doubly insuperable since people at least have minds or souls; there is no collective mind or soul. Only a person can consent or refuse, so only a person has any true freedom.[42]

Government is of course not the only vehicle for nurturing the growth of justice. Weil's vision of actual human life includes many structures that support meeting human needs, developing the capacity for people to make contact with reality, learning to see necessity for what it is and in time to consent to it and internalise the cosmic principle.[43] Religious practices could be such an aid, as can institutions and customs that celebrate and venerate work by imbuing it with virtues that offset the ways in which it is repetitive or fatiguing.[44] Work remains for Weil an engagement with necessity. Collective living, in the loose sense of that term, is a milieu for meeting many of the needs of the soul, e.g. through shared property and responsibilities for others. Collectives can hold the treasures of wisdom and practice accumulated over generations, the best achievements in various fields of human endeavour as well as a vision for the future. All of these Weil describes with the metaphor of roots that supply nourishment to what grows in the soil of the collective. In this way, for all that her conception of justice might require a revolution, she is a conservative in her defence of tradition, of culture, of community, and all the ways of living together that as a matter of fact nurture justice in us.

41 Legitimacy as a fact rather than a process is the topic of "Legitimacy of the provisional government".

42 The goals of a society are latent in both "Is the human person sacred?" and "What does the Occitanian inspiration consist in".

43 Weil's discussion of reading as an apprenticeship in meaning—and the practical techniques for altering meaning—is one example. See "Essay on the concept of reading".

44 See the sub-section "Love of religious practices" in "Forms of the implicit love of God" and also "Precondition of non-servile work" for more on this.

THE LAST YEARS OF WEIL'S LIFE

10. In 1937, Weil had absorbed the lessons of the preceding six years and these were the stimulus for her renewed effort to conceive a new socio-political order around justice. This was the intellectual labour she undertook over the next six years to form the body of her mature thought. The period following 1937 was a period in which Europe became increasingly unsettled. There were dark augurs in the expansion of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. While increasingly writing about international affairs, Weil worked on the new direction in her thinking, especially in notebooks she began to fill. France declared war on Germany on 3 September 1939 after the latter's invasion of Poland. The war did not begin in earnest for the French until early May 1940 and when it did it was over within six weeks. The Germans paraded through occupied Paris in late June 1940 after France capitulated by signing an armistice on punishing terms. The reduced, titular French State was divided into an occupied and an unoccupied or "free" zone. The unoccupied zone was nominally centred on Vichy and—encompassing the Languedoc and France's second city, Marseilles—divided France geographically between the historically Frankish and Occitanian peoples.

At the last possible moment in June 1940 Weil fled Paris with her parents, eventually settling in Marseilles in September. The Vichy government, under Marshall Pétain, was anti-Semitic in sentiment and in October 1940 became so by statute with legislation that among other things expatriated Jews and barred their employment. Unable to work, Weil published under an anagrammatic pseudonym, Émile NOVIS, to obscure her Jewish identity during the almost two years she spent in Marseilles. In 1942, the Vichy government intensified its enforcement of anti-Jewish statutes and policies. Weil knew her parents would not leave without her and reluctantly made plans to leave with them. They left France in May 1942 headed for New York via Casablanca. In June, they arrived in New York. Weil, desperate to contribute to the war, soon cajoled her way into a job in London with the Free French government-in-exile and after five months in New York arrived in London in December 1942. Working long hours to the limits of her energy and strength, without regard for her own well-being, Weil collapsed in her rented room in the middle of April 1943. Hospitalised with tuberculosis in both lungs and malnutrition, she remained in hospital for four months. Vehemently at

odds with the nascent policies of the Free French, from her hospital bed she resigned her position. She regretted bitterly having left France and was despairing about her own condition, which was not improving. She was moved to a sanatorium in Kent on August 17th where she subsequently died from a cardiac arrest on the evening of the 24th, age 34.

The time Weil spent in Marseilles was among the most intellectually fertile of her life. In Marseilles she found philosophical community as well as time to read, write and study the Hindu and Taoist traditions, and the history of science. She was particularly enriched by the friendship she formed with the Dominican priest, Joseph-Marie Perrin, whom she met in June 1941. He was a mentor to her in Catholic thought and they shared an interest in the mysticism of other religious or spiritual traditions. Perrin was a further spur to her use of religious language and ideas to articulate her philosophical thinking about justice and its basis. Some of her most extended and profound writings were addressed to or solicited by Perrin. Weil's attention was forcibly drawn back to the practical concerns of government and society, especially in London. Her work for the Free French included theoretical planning for the French Fourth Republic that would follow the liberation of France. In the almost five months before her hospitalisation Weil produced some of the most powerful work of her mature thinking, including her book-length study, later published as *The Need for Roots* (*L'enracinement*), as well as other essays that fused her political, religious, philosophical and cosmogonic thinking with her abiding concern for the realisation of justice in the actual lives of people.

THE FRUITS OF HER LABOUR

11.The task Weil found for herself as vocation was as a labourer in thought, in service to a future, just society. The labour in her short life bore fruit. Without being comprehensive in its detail, the thought she left behind is a novel conception of justice and the place it can have here below. She has indicated, in ways that reach the limits of what is possible, the foundation of the good order in the cosmos that must be the image and inspiration for the practices, institutions and spirit of justice in the myriad forms human collective living can take. The attention she lavished on the reality of human life was an act of love as often as it was a clear-eyed study of human motivations and their results. Weil's account

of human freedom begins from the conflict she identified between the natural urge to act for personal expansion and the supernatural thirst for good which is slaked only in active non-action. Freedom in obedience is certainly a suggestive idea, even a spur to reflection. Weil's ideas in short bursts or as stimulations are very suggestive, not least for the way they overturn contemporary platitudes in language with a seriousness that commands attention. But she was not a *provocatrice*; her aim to the end was to think what was true. So when her thought seems fanciful or extreme, charity requires the effort to recover and elaborate her ideas cohesively, rather than accept them as aphorisms and aperçus. That was the purpose in the survey of her mature thought. Three primary buttresses to her thought can be synthesised from that survey which will relate her thought to justice, freedom, and the nature of our world. Sketching these buttresses will bring into relief their differences from those that support current, prevailing thought.

Justice

In contemporary, Western political thinking, justice is a goal. The goal is the best possible accommodation of the competing interests of the citizenry. The content of the competing interests comes from the individuals, in the main. The structure of society is a political objective only as it pertains to the best resolution of varied interests, e.g. securing an equal standing to all. For this reason, this modern conception of justice is a large-scale problem of maximising the fulfilment of whatever each citizen has decided is in their interest. Public health and public education, for example, are assumed interests and therefore in the political realm.

The moral development of the citizenry, by contrast, is a matter of conscience, not a political matter. Indeed the democratic election is a vehicle for expressing with whom one's conscience is already aligned. People's interests and also the motives underpinning them are accepted as given. They are admitted as factors in justice without revision. They are the data. They matter insofar as conflict between them is what justice aims to resolve. That resolution will entail some coercion in which citizens are sometimes forced to act against what they take to be their own interests, e.g. through taxes or regulations. Much political thought concerns how this political coercion can be transmuted into something else, something legitimate, something just. To

transmute coercion from injustice to justice, justice may call in turn upon the force of reason, consent to the state or a collective decision arrived at by a fair procedure. The result is always an attempt to establish the political authority to impose a resolution of competing interests that can assume the name of justice. Punishment on this view is typically retribution against the interests of the offender or a behaviourist attempt to induce obedience to a political authority.

Weil's conception of justice is a vigil whose concern is first and foremost that citizens' needs are met as far as possible. Justice means giving someone what they are due. Socially, what is due is respect. Politically, in practice, it is what saves them from harm. Other than needs and the harms related to those needs, the interests of citizens play no part in constituting justice. The legitimacy of the political actor, of political authority, is derived from the extent to which its actions hasten or bolster the vigil over needs that is Weil's conception of justice. The more it has become possible to meet citizens' needs, the more the political actor is legitimate. So a simplistic analogy might present the conventional view as one in which justice is the aim to manage traffic so that more people get to wherever they have determined they want to go. For Weil, justice is laying out roads so that the most people are timely in arriving where they are *needed* and that the interference from other traffic is minimised. However, this analogy distorts Weil's view because in it justice seems solely to be a kind of structural goal that might be achieved precisely when everyone's needs are met. While no bad thing, Weil would call that natural justice, and a socio-political structure that produced this result would not be unjust.

Weil's idea though is that there is a justice beyond natural justice that can inspire citizens to feel an obligation toward justice; that is to say, that it inspires in them taking the vigil over the needs of their fellows to heart. They will then act not for the sake of justice but for the sake of the one in need. Returning to the analogy, there is supernatural justice when people have felt *moved* to travel where they are needed. Justice is therefore not enacted or achieved by a collective or a composite political personage, only by individuals. So, in collective living, which is the locus of politics, justice is cultivated by sustaining a way of life in which people increasingly, automatically, feel themselves moved to do what is needed to save their fellows from harm. To

nurture in people the obligation toward justice, work must have a central place in the way of life, because it is above all through work that we have contact with necessity; it is moreover through that contact that we have the possibility for internalising that principle which conduces to justice (as described in §§7–9). Punishment, on Weil's view, is continuous with justice and is only legitimate when it cultivates justice by awakening the feeling of obligation in the punished.

Freedom

At the root of a common, contemporary view of freedom is the idea that one is free when one can conceive an aim and act on it. Real freedom requires that the aim be one's own, unconstrained, not imposed from outside or caused by some distemper. The aim is then authentically one's own. It has the hallmark of one's authority and therefore one calls it "mine". If this is so, the aim and the action moving toward it is the expression of one's agency—agency being the causal power to effect change in the world. Unbounded agency is total freedom on this view. The agent imposes himself in the world, making *his* mark, that mark whose conception was the agent's own. That is the central image. It is then extended. Freedom in life is one in which the agent asks *and* answers the proverbial, "How should I live?" with a vision of life whose unconstrained realisation becomes the enduring aim of their agency. Success is measured by progress toward realising that vision. It is as if one conceives a mould for one's life and then turns toward making a part of the world fit that mould, by arranging states of affairs in the form of the mould. Freedom thus consists in the efforts to do, to make and to pursue, which efforts are furthered through practical reasoning, by knowledge of skills and technology. The view of freedom makes focal the direction that alone comes from within a person who is author of their personal values, personal desires and personal vision.

In stark contrast, Weil asserts that true freedom lies in obedience, in obeying, and action is more free the more detached it is from a personal vision. Effort toward free action is not then the effort to do, make and pursue. The effort involved is not in moving what is within outward. Instead, it lies in enabling what is outside to enter. The image is of a person standing

attentive, motionless, primed to obey, waiting only for a command.[45] Free action then lies in fidelity to the command one obeys, rather than those states of affairs one has realised. Weil's central idea, in contrast with the prevailing view, is that what is personal is no part of true freedom. In an activity in which truth is integral—e.g. journalism, science, drama—what is personal will not enter into reaching the truth. On the contrary, one would be diverted from it by the desire for the glory that one hopes will accompany reaching the truth. The personal desire here interferes with reaching the truth, thus inhibiting the freedom to reach the truth. Scientists or playwrights are undone when they distort the truth with the wishful thinking that so often accompanies the desire for glory. Likewise, the artist who seeks beauty ruins their work by a vain concern with being original. In a beautiful work, the artist's efforts have made beauty evident by means of craft or talent, but beauty itself is not what the artist conceived or made real. Instead, it was beauty to which they were obedient. Beauty provided the criterion for making the work better or worse, for getting closer to or being diverted from beauty. Craft and talent, no matter how original, will not of themselves yield beauty, as the fine camerawork in a Nazi propaganda film shows by its intrinsic ugliness.

If obedience is the essence of free action, and if obedience is more complete the more it is free from the competition from personal interests, then becoming free must involve setting aside personal interests. In their place is an attentive obedience. The prevailing view of freedom makes individual desire a god-head and is thus a kind of idolatry for Weil, whereas her own view requires humbling individual desires and the negation of the special importance attached to what is mine. Of course action spurred by personal desires will occur, but there is nothing particularly free in this on Weil's view. Those actions are determined by the necessity in the mental and bodily material of which we are made. Real freedom means escaping the slavery of necessity by consenting to obey. One is not then pushed by necessity but drawn toward what it commands. Under these circumstances, realising purposes and the ultimate good at which they aim is automatic. Metaphorically speaking, as opposed to the pneumatic pressure of agency pushing the body into motion, the openness of one's attention creates a vacuum which can draw the body into action—or better, response. The negative action of

45 The image, again, of patiently waiting is set out in "Theory of sacraments".

making oneself await what is to be obeyed eventuates in time into action.[46] Generalising, Weil's view is that free action is obedience to what is good, which brings her full circle around to the views sketched in §6 where purposiveness itself is in the end an orientation to the good. The form of the good in human affairs is justice.

The world

When the common, contemporary ideas of justice and freedom are combined, what emerges is a conception of the nature of our world in which the material of the world constitutes a machine for us to master by our wit and will. The machine seems capable, within limits, of producing any state of affairs. Our role is to operate the machine. This is, it seems, all we can do. But of course that is not our only role. It is for us to determine what the machine will produce, rather than accepting whatever it happens to produce. On this conception, the job is to conceive utopia and then use the machine to make it actual. Most will agree that states of affairs to be sought are those that are materially beneficial, e.g. keeping us healthy, comfortable and safe and able to pursue each of our visions for life. Yet, after platitudes, the question we must ask is what will decide us on the form utopia will take? Is it what we happen to want or what we should want? In Plato's parable of the great beast, we are given charge of a large beast and are in thrall to its whims so that we call good whatever happens to keep it pacific and bad whatever enrages it, even should these change.[47] Departing Plato, suppose we had the secret of the beast's physiology and could decide what would anger the beast and what would soothe it. Nothing inherent in the beast's material constitution or past behaviour could now decide for us which physiological alterations to make, provided we avoided killing it. How would we decide? On what basis? Plato's beast was originally a metaphor for society and its desires. With this added supposition, the beast serves as a metaphor for our world conceived as the machine that can produce utopia. If matter and its past is all there is, what would decide us on the constitution of our utopia?

46 Education, on Weil's view, can serve to produce this responsiveness, see "Reflections on the good use of school studies with a view to the love of God".

47 The image of the great beast from *Republic* 493c is a salutary one to which Weil turned time and again.

Weil's view, by contrast, is that our world, including us within it, is already a utopia in germ. This much she thinks is evident by the unity and concord on which its existence already depends. The most immediate evidence of that is the natural beauty available to our senses in every moment of every day. Likewise, the ongoing inner spectacle of individual experience conjured from the myriad sensory happenings in every moment is directly consequent on an enduring cosmic order. We do not have to create the order; it is already there. Therefore, it is not we who grow a utopia—as contemporary idiom has it—it will grow by itself if only it is untrammelled, allowed light and not deprived of nutrients. Metaphorically speaking, the germ that is our world, like any seed, already contains the principle of its own fruition. What is personal augments this not at all. The coming to fruition of the order or principle operative in the world is not hastened or advanced according to whether this personal desire or another was fulfilled, or even any particular state of affairs. On the contrary, our role is not to hinder growth, rather to nurture it. Both are done negatively by diminishing the personal within, which in turn nurtures growth in what is impersonal. So when truth grows in the world, the world grows better. When we love the truth, we grow better; so too for beauty or compassion or all the other forms of the good. In one sense Weil is a pessimist. So long as we exalt our whims and desires, we impede the love and harmony latent in the world and are held down by our material form. But she is also a true utopian, because we have everything we need already beneath our feet, between our ears and in our hearts.[48] If only we have enough contact with our reality, each can take the principle behind the world within and let it grow there. Between each person and the whole world, there are practical arrangements in our form of life, which are the institutions of work and the institutions of justice. They are there to connect each one of us to reality and the good.

In 1933, in "Prospects", she wrote that "[t]hey cannot prevent us from working toward clearly conceiving the object of our efforts . . . our weakness can in truth prevent us from prevailing, but not from comprehending the force

48 David McLellan's excellent study of Weil, *Utopian Pessimist*, is thus aptly titled (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989).

that crushes us. Nothing in the world can prohibit us from being lucid."[49] Simone Weil took the work she described as her own. To the very end of the time allowed to her, she worked tirelessly at her vocation, and never did she stop trying to be lucid. In the end, Weil's thoughts have to speak for themselves—and her through them. Whether one judges Weil's thoughts as too radical, too contrary to the mainstream or too impractical, it is only by thinking them through clearly that we can understand the alternatives she sought to outline. With a clear alternative laid alongside what we accept as justice, freedom or the nature of our world, a comparison is possible. We can see then to what extent these alternatives differ, by how much and whether these differences are necessary or not. Only with the light cast by this comparison can we know whether we might be deceived or even self-deceiving, whether our faith is not misplaced or whether we have not accommodated ourselves to false exigencies fabulated by low motives. This is the boon to be found today in the legacy we have inherited from Weil's labours in thought.

D. K. Levy

49 Weil, "Prospects", 23.

Notes on the translation

Simone Weil wrote:

> The real way of writing is to write as we translate. When we translate a text written in some foreign language, we do not seek to add anything to it; on the contrary, we are scrupulously careful not to add anything to it.[1]

The austere and sparse style she seems to expect imposes a heightened requirement of fidelity on any would-be translator of her works. Fidelity is always a requirement in a translation, still more so in a philosophical translation. In the case of an author as self-consciously meticulous and economical as Weil, the requirement for scrupulous fidelity may come into competition with the desire for an elegant translation.

This translation project arose from a close reading session of one of Weil's best-known essays. The session took an unexpected turn when the English title was recognised as being a seriously, indeed philosophically charged, mistranslation, and as the session continued the efforts to make sense of the essay often had to stray into dealing with the inaccuracies, inconsistencies and further straightforward mistranslations. Unless ours was an unusual

1 Letter to Gustave Thibon, quoted in S. Weil, *Gravity and Grace* (London: Routledge, 1952, rev. ed. 2002), xi.

experience, which was unlikely, this indicated that Simone Weil may have fallen victim to a form of good will at the hands of her translators. Touched perhaps by her depth, her seriousness and her 'beautiful soul' they may have given way to the temptation to clothe her thoughts in an elegant, even mellifluous, style. Weil's style is rarely smooth. It is obdurately harsh, at times repetitious and austere to an uninviting degree. What elegance there is lies in the rigour and economy of her thinking and language and in the development of a position gradually revealed through seemingly unconnected and unsupported claims that require repeated readings to reveal their place and connection within the overall structure.

By the end of the session, the close reading of the text we knew and valued had revealed not only specific problems in the translation but also the degree to which concerns of literary style had made it harder to see just how much meaning, structure and precision Weil packed into her carefully wrought sentences and paragraphs. This in turn occluded the structure of the argument and pushed the reader toward the piecemeal reading of a structured argument as a collection of aphorisms.

The lessons we took from our reading session became the guiding principles of our translation. We sought to preserve the rigour in her thought by preserving the—often self-conscious—precision and simplicity of her writing. This often meant balancing the requirements of fidelity to the French text with respect for the English language. We were thus as literal as possible and as liberal as necessary. The price is a style that may seem linguistically dull or prose that may appear somewhat stiff. We never entertained the hope that we might by translation improve on the original. Be that as it may, our hope has been that a single, consistent approach to translating a large block of Weil's best writing would be a boon to English readers who, before now, had to read from a varied patchwork of approaches to translation.

The focus on precision and structure came with certain imperatives. So, for example, every sentence in the translated text corresponds to a sentence in Weil: sentences are not compounded or divided; terminal punctuation is always preserved. Weil often used semi-colons to segment more complex thoughts, sometimes like steps in an argument. Though this at times felt uncomfortable in English, the semi-colons were preserved. Commas have been preserved, moved or added as required by English, including sometimes adding an 'and' or an 'or' or an Oxford comma to the ends of lists. A more difficult problem was posed by sentence structure. Weil constructs

her sentences carefully, often deliberately positioning words or phrases at the beginning of a sentence or at a particular, sometimes unexpected, place within it, to mark her focus and direction or to give the thought a certain emphasis and colouring. The positions of the words often contain a key to the progression of the argument, especially when the same word or phrase opens consecutive sentences or paragraphs. We therefore sought to preserve her sentence structure as much as possible, though syntactical disparities between the two languages made some restructuring unavoidable. A different, though connected, concern was the difference between the active and the passive voice in the sentences. The difference is central to Weil's thinking and she often makes her point by choosing one rather than the other. Where we could, we have sought to preserve her use, especially when this seemed to affect the argument's tone or content. Since English and French sometimes work differently with the voice of a sentence, this may have led in places to some awkwardness, certainly to some loss of elegance. Here we thought the price we was not only worth paying but necessary.

We have some sense of how Weil herself wrote in English from essays for which she produced drafts in English.[2] Where choice was necessary we favoured British over American English, including British spelling. We also inclined towards words in English that indicate their original French counterparts but did not hesitate to substitute English words that more exactly match the semantic sense of Weil's sentences.

We have also sought to give Weil's would-be English a reasonably modern quality while skirting around anachronism by avoiding too modern an English and without going as far as to channel an English speaker from 1940. This means, for example, maintaining the genders of pronouns as well as disregarding some currently common practice such as replacing 'man' with 'person' or 'men' with 'humans'. Weil would have insisted that there are important, philosophical, differences in meaning between, for example, speaking of a subject, a man, a person or a human being. For a similar reason, we have not translated French *on* (one) constructions with 'we' however normal this might be, and we use 'we' only when Weil herself does so. Not only are there important philosophical differences in the meaning or significance between what I say, you say, we say and one says—if only because it

2 See OC V:1, §I.1.

is often not be clear who 'we' represents—but for Weil what the first person plural signifies constituted a dangerous temptation for what the first person singular signifies, viz. someone's inner self, mental and spiritual.

For reasons indicated earlier we have been careful to translate focal terms the same way within a paragraph always, within an extended discussion nearly always, frequently in a whole essay and where possible within the whole corpus. Weil has, in addition, an array of her own favourite terms to which she has given special meanings. These terms, such as consent, attention, reality and purposiveness (*finalité*), have been translated consistently throughout. Also, we have left some French words with English homonyms untranslated, such as milieu, exigence and par excellence where this was thought to aid clarity.

Weil's own translations of Greek texts and verses from the Bible presented their own challenge. She often translated the same passage differently, even within the same text. Sometimes she mistranslated or, more likely, translated from imperfect memory. Some of her passages from the New Testament suggest that she may have been recalling them in the original Greek; this sometimes colours her word choices in French where she often prefers French homophones of the Greek or tries to duplicate Greek wordplay. Our approach has been to give priority to Weil's French translation over the original Greek. Thus, where Weil translates the same text differently, we do so as well; where she seems to make an error or an infelicitous choice of word, we do not correct her; for well-known biblical passages we have not substituted the King James translation or other standard translations. Where possible, we have inflected our translation of the French with some attention to the original source language. For example, where Weil has used the French *essence* to translate both the Greek *ousia* and *phusis* we have translated *essence* into English as 'essence' or 'nature' respectively.

Some words resisted translation and demanded compromise. The compound *l'arbitraire humain* refers to the externally undetermined character of the human will, and we translated it as the "gratuitousness of the human will". *Nourriture* can mean food or that which nourishes, so where *nourriture* does not refer literally to food, we translated it as nourishment, otherwise as food. The French word *morale* has no single equivalent in English because it can mean 'moral', as well as 'mental' in contrast with the physical. We have allowed context to do the work here. French has *liberté* where English has 'liberty' as well as the Germanic 'freedom'. We used 'liberty' largely for the political context and 'freedom' to refer to a human natural endowment. The word

groupement sometimes requires the awkward 'grouping', rather than 'group', to convey the sense in which groups may form without having been set up.

Two words of key importance in Simone Weil's work are particularly difficult to translate. The first is *charité*. In English 'charity' calls to mind charitable giving or institutions created for that purpose. In French *charité* has a wider meaning (retained in English in expressions like a 'charitable interpretation') and means or suggests neighbourly love; by contrast with the attachment of romantic love, it suggests, at least for Weil, essential mutuality, an attentiveness to the consent to be loved from the object of one's *charité*. While translating *charité* as 'charity' risks misleading the English reader, we found that using a term like 'love' or 'caring' would be even more misleading and so stayed with 'charity'.

The hardest word by far, *malheur*, is unfortunately also one of those most associated with Simone Weil's thought. *Malheur* is an ordinary French word meaning misfortune or unhappiness, evidently opposite of *bonheur*. Weil, however, gives it a far more distinctive character. For her, *malheur* comes in degrees, ranging from bad fortune to the depths of misery, always with some long-term, chronic pain. An essential effect of *malheur* is the diminution or destruction of the person's sense of self, their sense of being of any value or deserving of any consideration, both in their own eyes and in the eyes of the society. Weil often describes how the *malheureux* are repellent to those around them, even the most kind-hearted. *Malheur* makes thinking difficult, including thinking about a future in which there might be some relief or aid. This is connected with the loss of the sense that there is value anywhere and thus anything to which one could hope or aspire. Integral to *malheur* is the sense of supreme vulnerability, of there being no limit to what one might suffer, made all the worse by the added, terrible awareness that the suffering serves no purpose, malign, benign or redemptive. There is neither justice nor injustice in it. It is a product of blind necessity.

Malheur in Weil's hands is thus clearly no ordinary usage of the word, even in French. Mary McCarthy, an accomplished writer and translator, the first to translate one of Weil's non-political writings in 1945,[3] translated *malheur* mainly as misfortune but also as sorrow, suffering and calamity. It was Emma Craufurd who, in the first translation of extracts from Weil's notebooks in 1952, translated *malheur* as 'affliction'.[4] Since then, 'affliction' has become

3 "The *Iliad* or, The Poem of Force", *Politics*, November, 1945, 321–331.

4 Weil, *Gravity and Grace*.

the most common rendering of Weil's *malheur* in English. On the one hand, it is evident that 'affliction' does not express what Weil meant: what Weil meant has elements one might try to express by speaking of wretchedness, blight or being blighted, of woe, perhaps even despair, though none of these is wholly satisfactory. On the other hand, while 'affliction' may be more of a distortion than some of these other alternatives, it is now an established rendering and since none of the others were a perfect match either, we have decided to stay with it. For the translator the lack of an apt translation is vexing; for the reader it is important to be aware of the shortcomings of 'affliction' and to seek the sense of the concept from the use Weil makes of it.

The texts for this anthology were chosen with a view to giving the full compass of Weil's thinking, though especially her philosophical thinking, in those texts where it is at its most philosophically rich, powerful and deep. We confined ourselves to texts written after 1936. As set out in the introduction to this volume, Weil's thought changed, deepened and took on new dimensions beginning in 1937 and came into full flower between 1940 and 1943. The writings in the six years that comprised the second half of her life after university contain what is most profound—perhaps what will be most enduring—in her thought. Though the heart of Weil's thought is justice here below as well as its underpinnings beyond the material world, her thought and writing extend also to science, history and literature. Our selection aims to reflect some of that range.

We also confined ourselves to selecting from her essays. Weil had developed the essay form under the careful direction of her lycée teacher Alain, who made style and a cohering focus elemental. The essay form, more than any other, shows the patient intricacy of Weil's thought. Her opening paragraphs, often bold, assertive and seeming to foreclose discussion, are invariably matched by concluding paragraphs that lead the reader back around to the opening themes. Sometimes it is only at its conclusion that the essay's discussions and seeming digressions—striking observations often ripe for extraction as aphorisms or profound insights—come into focus as parts in a deliberate movement to redirect the reader's perspective onto the theme of the essay. What had seemed eddies and whorls in the flow of the river were actually the river itself, carrying the reader along with the author's current.

Restricting the selection to essays precluded drawing on Weil's correspondence or her extensive notebooks from this period. Her notebooks contain, to be sure, rich seams from which Weil's thinking can be mined. But any extraction from the notebooks would be a gerrymandered selection that

risks being gnomic from the brevity of the selections or by fabricating a false unity from the conjoining of fragments.

The reader for Weil's notebooks was meant no doubt to be Weil herself. Likewise, there was one intended reader for her correspondence—her correspondent—whose responses and background knowledge she could anticipate. By contrast, in the essays Weil subjects herself to the discipline of the form required to address an unknown reader. This discipline often obliges her to consolidate the ideas that appear tentative or unclear in her notebooks or correspondence, to put them on a firmer foundation and to work through their presentation with a structure that is explanatory and dialectically cogent. An essay such as "God's love and affliction" is a clear example of Weil mining thoughts from her notebooks, then refining them, before giving them the necessary polish for another reader. The essays provide a reader therefore not only with the most considered and developed version of Weil's thought but also with the version Weil would have been willing to stand behind.

EDITORIAL APPARATUS

The sources for all our translations have been Weil's manuscripts as presented in the volumes of the *Œuvres Complètes* edition of Simone Weil's works, published by Gallimard. Many of our footnotes and philological remarks contain the fruits of the work undertaken by the editors of those volumes. One advantage of the *Œuvres Complètes* is that Weil's emendations or corrections to the manuscripts are indicated. These can be illuminating and we have retained the large majority of them. Words that have been struck through or otherwise rubbed out are indicated by placing the text in italics between vertical bars |*like this*|. We have also inserted the page numbering from the *Œuvres Complètes* into the translation to allow the determined reader to find the original page of the source text directly. Square brackets in boldface, of which there are few, have been placed there by Simone Weil. All other square brackets indicate a supplementation by the editors of the *Œuvres Complètes* or by the translators. Finally, where we refer to volumes of the *Œuvres Complètes* we use the established convention of referring to the volume number with Roman numerals and the book or *tome* using Arabic numerals, preceding these by 'OC'. So, for example, 'OC IV:2' refers to book 2 of volume 4 of the *Œuvres Complètes*.

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Part 1

HERE BELOW

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PREFACE TO PART 1
Here below

The world, including the natural world and the human world, with its political and social institutions and practices, is part of what Simone Weil called *existence*, as opposed to pure being. What exists, what is in existence, is what comes into being, changes and ceases to be during some interval of time. This is in contrast to what is, to what has being in some way but is nonetheless outside time and thus never changes nor ceases to be. That is the supernatural, which is beyond nature, beyond our world. Weil's concerns always began with people in our world, irrespective of creed or nation. Their suffering, whose variety she was always attentive in distinguishing, was the impetus for much of her writing. It is people who must live, work, develop, associate with others and sustain traditions, as well as take their part in whichever political process holds sway. That is, it is people who are in existence in the world *here below*—as she puts it—and it is these people who suffer injustice or are nurtured by justice. Each person's time here below is short and everyone, everywhere, is subject to natural forces and necessities, alongside the hurt that others inflict. That makes people's needs urgent. Therefore, what is always focal in Weil's thinking is a concern with people and what might be done to make their lives better. The texts in Part 1 especially illustrate this focus even as it appears in varied contexts.

Part 1 opens in "Study for a declaration of obligations to the human being" with a bold declaration of our obligations to others, set out in a secular, civic language Weil imagines anyone can share regardless of culture or creed. Immediately though, Weil turns to ensuring this obligation does not remain theoretical by giving the requirements for fulfilling this obligation in a real

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and manifest way in the lives of those that are in need. As if this were not grounding enough in real life, she then sketches the earthly, human and factual basis for the determination of what a human being can be in want of, can need. This elaboration is set within the explicitly political form of a credo to be affirmed by anyone seeking a position that would place the well-being of others in their hands. It is also a prime example of Weil's method: starting from the immaterial and necessary before moving to the reality of human life, whether individual and political.

The last text in Part 1—"Is the human person sacred?"—does the same but in reverse. Beginning with what is possible and impossible in real life, in how we live together, in our practices, right down to what we can say to each other, Weil calls attention to the dependence our existence here below has on what is *not* here below, what is higher, what is unchanging and transcendent. Even then, however, it is for a practical, worldly purpose that she calls our attention to what is higher. What is higher must be the inspiration for those institutions here below that, as a matter of fact, determine whether people's needs are met, whether people can grow and develop to the limit of their potential.

The texts between the first and last are often field notes on humanity: its history, nature and practices. However, none is solely descriptive. Each is also, directly or indirectly, evaluative, even prescriptive. For example, in "Let's not start the Trojan War again", what we learn from a clear description of the politically destructive potential of the human propensity for abstraction comes also with a remedy to help tether thought to the real and concrete. Again, the novel observation of the phenomenon of bureaucratic oppression in "Concerning Syndicalism" itself suggests corrections for our political institutions. In some of the texts, Weil's subject is the place of science or religion now, in the past, and in the future.[1] Elsewhere Weil progressively narrows her focus by relating the individual apprehension of meaning to the nature of one's values and then to the contemplative form for philosophy that she advocates.[2] The essays chosen for Part 1 focus, across a broad range of concerns, on the various ways in which human life here below, in its many contexts, may be not only ameliorated but helped to reach its potential.

1 "What does the Occitanian inspiration consist in", "Reflections on quantum theory" and "This war is a war of religions" are examples.

2 This movement is most evident in the movement between her "Essay on the concept of reading" and "Some reflections on the concept of value".

1

STUDY FOR A DECLARATION OF OBLIGATIONS TO THE HUMAN BEING

[(CONDENSED TEXT THAT COULD MAYBE REALLY FORM THE PREAMBLE OF AN OFFICIAL DECLARATION?) 95

There is a reality situated outside the world that eludes all the human faculties except attention and love.

Responding to it is the exigence[1] for absolute good which is always at the centre of the heart of every man.

From it descends all the good that can exist in this world, all beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, all subordination of human conduct to obligations.

Those who recognise it and love it are the only intermediary through which the good descends among men.

It is recognised and loved in deed, even if it is not in words, by all those who bear an equal respect for all human beings, and by them alone.

1 The French 'exigence' means the same as the English 'exigence', but the latter is unfamiliar and little used. Demand or requirement would be a common translation if the idea is impersonal, but when it is personal then need, even craving, may be closer.

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There is only one possibility for the expression of universal respect for
96 human beings, one which is provided by the earthly needs of the soul and body of men.

That possibility is the sole foundation of obligation. Responding to each need is an obligation. Corresponding to each obligation is a need. There is no other obligation relating to human affairs.

The list of obligations must correspond to that of the needs, determined after a study that is always liable to revision.

The object of public life is to take all measures conducive to delivering to the greatest extent possible power in all its forms, without exception, into the hands of those who truly accept to be bound by the universal obligation to all human beings.

The law is the assemblage of permanent measures conducive to producing this effect.][2]

I. PROFESSION OF FAITH

There is a reality situated outside the world, that is to say outside space and time, outside the mental universe of man, outside the whole domain that human faculties can reach.

Responding to this reality is that exigence for absolute good that always lives at the centre of the heart of every man and never finds any object in this world.

It is also made manifest here below by the absurdities, the insoluble contradictions, that human thought always runs into when it moves only in this world.

Just as the reality of this world is the sole foundation of facts, so the other reality is the sole foundation of good.

From it alone descends into this world all the good that can exist in it, all
97 beauty, all truth, all justice, all legitimacy, all order, and all subordination of human conduct to obligations.

The sole intermediary by which the good can descend from there into the milieu of men are those among men who have their attention and love turned towards it.

2 The square brackets, in ink, were added to the typescript by Weil herself. They demarcate the draft of an oath from the draft of a declaration.

Although it lies outside the reach of all human faculties, man has the ability to turn his attention and his love towards it.

Nothing can ever justify supposing of a man, whoever he may be, that he is without this ability.

This ability is real here below only as far as it is exercised. The sole condition for it to be exercised is consent.

This consent can be articulated. It might not be, even internally, or might not appear clearly to awareness, though it has actually taken place in the soul. Often it has not in fact taken place, though it is expressed in language. Articulated or not, the sole and sufficient condition is that it has in fact taken place in it.

Whoever actually consents to direct his attention and his love outside the world, towards the reality situated beyond all human faculties, is given to succeed. In that case, sooner or later, good descends upon him which through him radiates around him.

The exigence for absolute good dwelling at the centre of the heart and the ability, albeit virtual, to direct attention and love outside the world and to receive good from it, together constitute a link that attaches all men without exception to the other reality.

Whoever recognises this other reality also recognises that link. Because of it, he takes every human being without any exception as something sacred to which he is enjoined to show respect.

There is no other possible motive for universal respect towards all human beings. Whatever articulation of belief or disbelief it pleases a man to choose, he whose heart inclines him to practice this respect in fact recognises a reality other than that of this world. He who is a stranger to this respect is also a stranger to the other reality.

The reality of this world is composed of differences. Unequal objects solicit attention unequally in it. A particular play of circumstances or a particular appeal proffers the person of some human beings to our attention. Due to different circumstances and a certain lack of appeal, other beings remain anonymous. They elude attention or, if attention is directed on them, 98
it distinguishes them only as elements of a collective.

Attention that dwells entirely in this world is entirely subject to the effect of these differences, still less can it be spared from them since it does not discern them.

Amidst these differences of fact, respect cannot be equal toward all unless it addresses something identical in all. Men are different in all the relations

that relate them to things situated in this world, without any exception. There is nothing identical in all of them except the presence of a link with the other reality.

All human beings are absolutely identical insofar as they can be conceived as constituted by a central exigence for good around which the psychic and bodily matter is arranged.

Attention in fact directed outside the world alone has actual contact with the essential structure of human nature. It alone possesses an always identical ability to cast light over a human being whoever he may be.

Whoever has this ability also has his attention actually directed outside the world, whether he realises it or not.

The link that attaches the human being to the other reality is, like the reality, also outside the reach of all human faculties. The respect it makes felt once recognised cannot be made manifest to him.

This respect cannot find here below any kind of direct expression. If it is not expressed, it has no existence. There exists for it a possibility of indirect expression.

The respect inspired by man's link with the reality alien to this world makes itself manifest to the part of man situated within the reality of this world.

The reality of this world is necessity. The part of man that is situated in it is the part given over to necessity and subject to the misery of need.

For the respect felt toward the human being there exists only one possibility of indirect expression, which is provided by the needs of men in this world, the earthly needs of the soul and of the body.

It is rooted in a connection established in human nature between the exigence for good, which is the very essence of man, and his sensibility. Nothing justifies ever believing of any man that in him this connection does not exist.

Through this connection, when, as a result of other men's acts or omis-
99 sions, the life of a man is destroyed or maimed by a wound or privation of the soul or body, it is not only the sensibility in him that suffers the blow, but also the aspiration to the good. There has thus been sacrilege toward what in man is sacred.

Sensibility can, by contrast, be alone at stake, if a man suffers a privation or wound by the mere mechanics of natural forces, or if he is aware that those who seem to inflict it on him, far from wishing him ill, obey solely a necessity he himself recognises.

The possibility of the indirect expression of respect toward the human being is the foundation of obligation. Obligation has for its object the earthly needs of the soul and of the body of human beings whoever they may be. Responding to each need is an obligation. Corresponding to each obligation is a need. There is no other kind of obligation relating to human affairs.

If one thinks one sees others, they are either false, or it is by a mistake that they have not been classified under this category.

Whoever has his attention and his love in fact turned towards the reality alien to the world recognises at the same time that he is bound, in public and private life, by the unique and perpetual obligation to remedy, in accord with his responsibilities and to the extent of his power, all the privations of souls and bodies apt to destroy or disfigure the earthly life of a human being whoever he may be.

The structure matching the limits on power and the ordering of responsibilities is not legitimate unless everything possible has been done to bring the necessity of imposing it to the knowledge of those who are subject to its consequences, without any deceit and in a manner such that they can consent to accept it.

No set of circumstances ever sets a person outside this universal obligation. The circumstances that with respect to a man or a category of men seem to exempt them from it only impose it that much more imperatively.

The thought of this obligation circulates amongst all men under very different forms and with very unequal degrees of clarity. Men incline more or less strongly toward either consenting or refusing to adopt it as a rule of their conduct.

Consent is most often mixed with deceit. When it is without deceit, its practice is not without failures. Refusal means falling into crime.

The proportion of good and evil in a society depends in one part on 100
that of consent and refusal, in the other part on the distribution of power between those who consent and those who refuse.

All power, of whatever kind, left in the hands of a man who has not given to this obligation an informed consent, is power badly placed.

As for a man who chose refusal, his exercise of a function, large or small, public or private, which delivers into his hands human destinies, constitutes in itself a criminal activity. All those who, knowing his mind, authorised him to exercise this function, are accomplices.

A state whose official doctrine in its entirety constitutes an incitement to this crime has involved itself in its entirety in the crime. It retains no trace of legitimacy.

A state that is not based on a doctrine directed above all against all forms of this crime does not possess the full measure of legitimacy.

In a system of laws where there is no provision for preventing this crime, the essence of law is lacking. A system of laws which provides some measures for preventing certain forms of this crime but not others only partly possesses the character of law.

A government whose members commit this crime or authorise it in those below them is a traitor to its function.

Any kind of collectivity, institution or collective way of life whose normal functioning involves or leads to the practice of this crime is thereby tainted by illegitimacy and liable to reform or removal.

A man makes himself complicit in this crime if, having a part, large, small or minimal in the direction of public opinion, he refrains from condemning it every time he has knowledge of it, or if he at times refuses to take note of it so as not to have to condemn it.

A country is not innocent of this crime if public opinion, being free to express itself, does not condemn the current practice of it or if, freedom[3] of expression being suppressed, the opinions which circulate clandestinely do not include this condemnation.

101 The object of public life consists in placing to the greatest extent possible all forms of power into the hands of those who truly consent to be bound by the obligation required of every man toward all human beings, and who have an understanding of it.

The law is the set of permanent provisions likely to have this result.

Understanding the obligation is two-fold. It comprises understanding the principle and understanding the application.

Given that the domain of application is constituted by human needs in this world, it falls to the intelligence to conceive the concept of need and to discern, distinguish and enumerate, with all the accuracy of which it is capable, the earthly needs of the soul and of the body.

3 The translation of 'liberté' varies between liberty and freedom. The first has been used with the positive sense of a liberty afforded to people, while the second has been used in the negative sense of not restraining an inherent capacity.

This study is always subject to revision.

*

(II. Study of human needs. III. Declaration of obligations.)[4]

List of needs of the soul: freedom, obedience; equality, hierarchy; private and collective property; security, risk; responsibility; honour, punishment; rootedness; etc.—

EXPOSÉ OF OBLIGATIONS 102

The fundamental obligation toward human beings is subdivided into several concrete obligations through the enumeration of the essential needs of the human creature. Every need is the object of an obligation. Every obligation has a need for its object.

This concerns only earthly needs, for man can satisfy only these. It concerns needs of the soul as much as those of the body. The soul has needs and, when these are not met, is in a state analogous to the state of a starved and maimed body.

The needs of the soul can for the most part be arranged into pairs of opposites that balance and complete each other.

The human body needs above all food, warmth, sleep, health, rest, exercise, and clean air.

The human soul needs equality and hierarchy.

Equality is the public recognition, effectively expressed in institutions and mores, of the principle that an equal degree of attention is owed to the needs of all human beings. Hierarchy is the ladder of responsibilities. Since attention tends to turn toward the top and linger there, special provisions are necessary to make equality and hierarchy compatible in fact.

The human soul needs consenting obedience and freedom.

Consenting obedience is what one gives to an authority because one considers it legitimate. It is not possible in relation to a political power established 103
by conquest or coup d'état, nor in relation to an economic power based on money. Freedom is the power of choice inside the space left between the direct constraint of the forces of nature and the authority accepted as legitimate. The space must be large enough for liberty not to be a fiction, but extended only to innocent matters, without certain forms of crime ever being made licit.

4 This would seem to be the plan for the study Weil has mentioned in the prior sentence. It is moreover the study she carried out in *The Need for Roots*, which she also sketches in her "Exposé" of obligations on the next manuscript page, 102.

The human soul needs truth and freedom of expression.

The need for truth requires that all should have access to the cultivation of the mind without having to be materially or morally transplanted. It requires that in the domain of thought no pressure, material or moral, should be exerted stemming from a concern other than the exclusive concern with truth; this implies banning all propaganda without exception. It requires protection against error and deception, which transforms every avoidable material falsehood publicly asserted into punishable misconduct. It requires a public health protection against poisons in the domain of thought.

But intelligence needs to practice its power of forming opinions without being limited by any authority. There must therefore be a domain of pure intellectual research that is separate yet accessible to all, where no authority intervenes.

The human soul needs, on the one hand solitude and privacy, and on the other social life.

The human soul needs personal and collective property.

Personal property is never constituted by the possession of a sum of money, but by the ownership of concrete objects, such as a house, field, furniture, or tools, which the soul views as an extension of itself and of the body. Justice requires that personal property, thus understood, be inalienable like liberty.

Collective property is not defined by legal title, but by the feeling of a particular human milieu which views certain material objects as an extension and crystallisation of itself. This feeling is only rendered possible by certain objective conditions.

The existence of a social class defined by the lack of personal and collective property is as shameful as slavery.

104 The human soul needs punishment and honour.

Every human being whom a crime has removed from the good needs to be reintegrated into the good by means of pain. Pain must be inflicted with a view to leading the soul to recognise freely someday that it was inflicted with justice. This reintegration into the good is punishment. Every innocent human being, or one who has finished atoning, needs his honourability to be recognised as being equal to that of everyone else.

The human soul needs disciplined participation in a common task with public utility, and it needs personal initiative in that participation.

The human soul needs security and risk. The fear of violence, hunger, or every other extreme evil is a malady of the soul. The boredom engendered by the absence of all risk is also a malady of the soul.

The human soul needs above all to be rooted in various natural milieux and to communicate with the universe through them.

One's country, the milieux defined by language, culture, a common historical past, one's profession, and one's locality are examples of natural milieux.

Anything that has the effect of uprooting a human being or preventing him from taking root is criminal.

The criterion for recognising that somewhere the needs of human beings are satisfied is a blossoming of fraternity, joy, beauty and happiness. Wherever there is a withdrawal into self, sadness, and ugliness, there are privations to remedy.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

For this Declaration to become the practical inspiration of the life of the country, the first condition is that it be adopted with that intention by the people.

The second condition is that whoever exercises or desires to exercise a power of whatever kind—political, administrative, judicial, economic, technical, spiritual or otherwise—should be bound to commit himself to take 105
the Declaration as the practical rule of his conduct.

In this case the uniform and universal character of the obligation is to a certain extent modified by the specific responsibilities involved in a specific power. This is why it is necessary to add to the pledge of commitment, "by giving special attention to the needs of the human beings for whom I am responsible."

The violation of such a commitment, either in word, or in deed, must be in principle always punishable. But the emergence of institutions and moral standards permitting its punishment requires in most cases several generations.

Assent to this declaration implies a continual effort to effect the fastest possible appearance of these institutions and moral standards.

Oeuvres complètes V:2

Weil's work for the Free French in London in 1943 stimulated her to write a book-length groundwork for a new French state, later published as *The Need for Roots*. Alongside that Weil continually redrafted a statement encapsulating the new state's founding principles. This might function as a constitutional document and, in its shortened form, perhaps an oath of office. It presents in microcosm the whole of her mature political outlook and, notably, translates her spiritual ideas into a neutral language more appropriate for ordinary political discourse.

2

CONCERNING SYNDICALISM "SINGLE, APOLITICAL, MANDATORY"

1 265

The idea of a "single, apolitical, mandatory" syndicalism, presented by Detoeuf in his lecture, rests on some indisputably correct ideas.[1] The first is that, since interests always compromise and principles heated by passion never compromise, turning social conflicts into simple struggles between interests by eliminating passions and principles from them would ensure social peace. Hence the formula of apolitical Syndicalism. The second is that a man who holds a place in industrial production has by this very fact a right to have his say in any conflict bearing on the production, even if he does not subscribe to any ideology. Hence the formula of mandatory Syndicalism, which gives a voice to all. The third is that struggle and competition 266
between various organisations make men unreasonable, excite polemical passions and one-upmanship, and paralyse judgment; hence the formula of

1 Syndicalism in the French context can mean the traditional French labour movement—trade unionism as the specific movement to unionise workers—and also relates to a 'syndicate' or a trade union.

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a single syndicalism. All of it is pointless to revisit; Detoeuf has shed enough light on it. But his analysis is incomplete. Interests, principles, and passions are drivers in social life; but there is another driver, which is perhaps the most important, the forgetting of which falsifies all thought, and this is force. Those who are not subject to it are inclined to forget it. Detoeuf has produced a list of desirable reforms, a list that I will not call generous, for this word is odious when it is simply a matter of fulfilling elementary duties of humanity, but which is marked by a definite concern for justice. The question that must be asked is whether the organisation he recommends is fit to realise the reforms he calls for. Lenin formed the Bolshevik party so as to bring about the gradual disappearance of the state and the most democratic regime ever seen on earth; he had only forgotten to ask himself whether this party, through its activity, would lead to this regime. The revolutionaries of 1792 went to war to spread the Revolution; they had forgotten to ask themselves whether the war, by its natural course, would not kill the revolution. The most common and the most deadly error in political matters is to believe that in order to realise a grand plan it is enough to realise a powerful tool. A powerful tool is never powerful for all and everything, but only for realising that which follows necessarily from its structure. Just as a chopping machine will never do filleting, so too each social mechanism comprises only a narrow set of possibilities. That is why no field of study is more necessary than that of social mechanisms, although none is less practiced.

When it comes to syndicalism, one must ask what kind of mechanism would the organisation recommended by Detoeuf be. That is to say one must ask what displacements of forces it would involve. Today, management possesses a measure of force for producing and for keeping the workers obedient; the state possesses a measure of force for administrating the country and for preparing for the eventuality of a war; the workers possess a measure of force, decreasing since 1936 incidentally, which they make use of, provided
267 it is not usurped by political parties for their manoeuvres, big and small, for defending, in a purely negative manner, their interests, their dignity, and what they deem to be their rights. Which of these forces would carry more weight, which would carry less, in the institution proposed? If the workers' force decreases, then one cannot hope for reforms establishing more justice than there is at present; because if this force does not carry enough weight, then bosses have their minds less occupied with the life their workers lead than with production and sales, statesmen have their minds less occupied with the life the citizens lead than with national defence. Recent

history shows this well enough; and, to verify this, each boss, each statesman has only to ask himself sincerely how many minutes he devoted in a day, a week, or a month to thinking about the living conditions of the workers in March 1936, and how many in July 1936.[2] The shock to the nation's conscience produced by June 1936 left no permanent marks, and most of those who were awakened at that time to a serious and sustained meditation on social problems will probably no longer think about them in 1940.

If moreover, which I do not believe, the single and mandatory trade union did increase the workers' force, another danger would arise against which this project provides no remedies, namely the abusive exploitation of the countryside by the cities. A powerful workers' trade unionism oriented solely to the defence of their material interests would result, unless counterbalanced by a farmers' organisation, in the bleeding dry of villages, condemned to pay with their resources and their life, for the luxury, the armaments, and for all the lavish spending of the bourgeoisie and the state.

2

[THE DECLINE OF TRADE UNIONS]

The idea of establishing single, apolitical and mandatory trade unions as a guarantee of social peace rests on a truth little-known, but clear to anyone who reflects on it; it is that interests always compromise and that passions alone do not compromise. This is a truth of experience and at the same time almost demonstrable, for as long as the adversary has some strength, then 268
even a less than satisfactory settlement will always cost less than even a victorious fight. It would appear that conflicts where interest alone is the cause are rare; since from time immemorial one has seen men fight more often than compromise, and from the time when Aeschylus showed the unfailing mechanism by which immoderation is punished to the present day, things have not changed in this regard. The doctrine of economic liberalism distorted everything by considering within the economic domain only conflicts of interest; and Marxism has perpetuated this error of liberalism, along with many others, through its vocabulary and its slogans, even though all of Marx's concrete analyses reveal economic struggles as struggles of passions, namely of will to power and will to liberation. Whoever found the secret of

2 This period in France in 1936 was roiled by major strikes that caused considerable political unrest and, by August, led to significant changes to labour legislation.

limiting human concerns to interest alone would by the same token establish total peace, peace between nations, peace between classes, peace between all men. He would at the same time, truth be told, eliminate all virtue, all art, and all thought. One could judge, and I myself do so judge, that this would be to purchase peace at too high a price, and one would end up with a peace less desirable than any war. But we do not find ourselves, we will not find ourselves, faced with such a choice. The problem is not to eliminate the passions, for men will never be without passions, but to orient them in such a way as to avoid, if possible, catastrophes. The institution of a single, mandatory, apolitical trade union is proposed to us as an admirably simple procedure for emptying social conflicts of the passions that make them bitter by making the trade union the interpreter of interests and interests alone.

For the sake of clarity in this discussion, one should first recognise that this is not a view about the future of trade unionism, but purely and simply the proposal to abolish trade unionism. I am talking about workers trade unionism and, anyway, when one says trade unionism without any qualifier, everyone understands that it is workers trade unionism that is meant. Employers' groupings, recent, without tradition, founded artificially for expedience and the needs of the struggle, can, without significant transformation, be merged and extended to cover all compulsorily, if the situation demands it. The resistance such a measure would encounter would not lie within the groupings themselves, but in the reluctance of bosses to club together. On the workers' side, it is something else entirely. Trade unionism,
269 especially in France, is a popular movement, as mysterious in its origin, as singular, as inimitable as a folk song; it has a tradition, a spirit, an ideal; it has its heroes, its martyrs and almost its saints, mostly unknown; it does not correspond to a particular doctrine, tactic or opportunity, but to the aspirations and the needs of a people at a certain time in history. The single, mandatory and apolitical organisation proposed to us would have nothing in common with this movement but the name and, in the interest of clarity, it would be better to find another name. The question that it raises, if it is put in the right terms, is not therefore: is it desirable that trade unionism evolve in this or that direction? But: is it desirable that trade unionism be eliminated to make way for a simple administration of workers interests?

There is, of course, no sacrilege in raising such a question; trade unionism does not possess any divine right to prolong its existence. It began, it can end. I would say further, the time is probably not far off when this question

will no longer be of any but academic interest, because trade unionism will have died an almost natural death. Perhaps our time is, among other things, the time of the death of trade unionism; in that case it will not have lived long. There are many signs that this is so. In Russia, in Italy, in Germany, trade unions are no longer; in Austria too, one can say the same, even though the organisation they call the trade union retains more traces of trade unionism than in the three totalitarian countries. In Spain, whatever the outcome of the civil war, the trade union tradition, which was still fizzing with life, seems to be under serious threat, and it is not certain that the C.N.T.,[3] which signally represents this tradition, can survive for long; as for the rest, first power, then persecutions and compromises have profoundly changed them. In the United States, where it is common knowledge that the American Federation of Labour is suffering from an incurable sclerosis, the Committee for Industrial Organisation,[4] which has been presented in Europe as constituting the living part of American trade unionism, seeks to impose in the factories where it has the strength to do so mandatory union dues deducted from salaries by the boss himself; it is itself thus seeking to transform itself into a mandatory and single trade union organisation, albeit not apolitical.

In the countries where trade unionism is dead, violence, a violence exercised by the state and directed against trade unionism, has intervened to kill 270
it; but the murder only helped and accelerated a natural decay. In Germany, for example, I heard it said in 1932 by a trade union activist, in justifying the inertia of trade unions: We are perfectly safe provided we keep quiet, since capitalism itself needs trade unions to function and the Hitlerites will not win if we stay closely linked with the state. That mindset, which was then widespread, showed that German trade unionism was no longer a popular movement, but just an administrative body that was serving as a cog in the daily functioning of the regime. After that, it did not take much to turn it into a single, mandatory, apolitical body, and a few months later this is what it actually became, seamlessly, with a simple replacement of the leadership and the sending of the old leadership, even though all were ready to comply, into concentration camps. One can question, it is true, whether the German

3 *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (National Confederation of Labour).

4 This is the earlier name for the CIO which is better known in connection with the AFL-CIO. At the time Weil was writing; the CIO had broken from the AFL (American Federation of Labour) and was in its self-presentation the true trade union of America.

trade unions are apolitical; but they are about as close to it as any grouping can be in a totalitarian country, as much as an association of chess players or mathematicians.

In France, in the birthplace of trade unionism, we are perhaps witnessing, without really realising it, a slow and natural death of the trade union movement. The Labour Statute that the employers organisations portray, with or without comic intent, as a revolutionary enterprise of the C.G.T.[5] is, at least in the draft legislation, nothing other than a death certificate for French trade unionism. To see this one need only specify the role of the C.G.T. under the terms of this draft. The C.G.T. has no part in hiring, firing or internal discipline within companies. In the case of a dispute it can propose strike action, but it is up to the entirety of the workers, organised or not, to decide on it, and to decide every eight days on its continuation; those who, through a lack of awareness, passivity, indifference to their own fate, or a feeling of their own ignorance should be incapable of the small effort of voting, would be compelled to do so by fines and will therefore vote, it goes without saying, any which way. If the dispute is taken forward, it is the state itself that ensures the work stoppage. The trade union organisation is responsible only for appointing what is called, who knows why, a workers' arbitrator, who is in practice just a lawyer charged with pleading the workers' case before the
271 head arbitrator. The head arbitrator's decision comes quickly and, unless the boss refuses to act on it, puts an end to all strike action on pain of very severe penalties. The C.G.T. also negotiates collective bargaining agreements but, in the event of difficulties, it is the state that substitutes for the contracting parties. In sum, the C.G.T. would transform itself, without exaggeration, into a breeding ground of specialist lawyers charged with pleading the simple preservation of pre-existing rights.

Among the demands that the C.G.T. has put forward against the draft legislation, there was only one that it supported with any vigour, and that was the sliding scale for wages. Leaving aside the economic consequences of the sliding scale, who does not see that the role of the trade unions, already so slight within the official draft, would be all but annihilated? The preservation of the workers' current standard of living across fluctuations in currency and in prices would be guaranteed by an automatic mechanism, and the

5 *Confédération Générale du Travail* (General Confederation of Labour).

workers would deny themselves once and for all the hope of ever obtaining or even asking for an improvement. The position taken by the C.G.T. in regard to the Labour Statute is properly speaking a position of suicide in relation to its own existence as a trade union organisation. What is more, it is difficult to say to what extent there is at present a C.G.T. position. The C.G.T. at this point leads a life contrary to its own statutes; it has not had a congress since the unification of the trade unions, and the congress of unification did little more than consecrate outpourings of reconciliation. Even more, the number of members makes it very difficult, almost impossible, to organise a true congress, and since those charged with overcoming the difficulty have no interest in making superhuman efforts in this direction, there will not be a true congress, there will only be a shadow of one. Men not competent to speak on behalf of the C.G.T. have thus almost signed the C.G.T.'s death certificate. But their act aroused almost no protest, so far as we know, apart from two metal workers unions which, being in the hands of the Communist Party, are hardly able to escape the suspicion of this being simply a political manoeuvre. Few workers will probably have been able to study the texts of the laws proposed from top to bottom; the silence of the activists is more significant since almost all have kept silent and those who have expressed some reservations put hardly any energy into it. It is too easy to speak of treachery. The loyalty of a number of trade union activists is not in doubt, but it is natural that loyalty should diminish in energy when the 272
thing to which one wants to remain loyal is in decline. If everyone, or just about everyone, at the C.G.T. keeps silent it is probable that they all share a secret impossible to betray, but one that is betrayed by the facts; this secret is that of the real weakness of the trade union movement beneath its apparent strength.

One cannot yet foresee what will become of the Labour Statute following parliamentary manoeuvrings; one can predict even less what will become of it upon its implementation. This depends in part on the underlying vitality that might still survive in grassroots organisations; if some still persists, the law might remain a dead letter, which would not contribute to clarifying the situation. It also depends on the complicated games of Soviet diplomacy within our workers organisations. Let it be said in passing, the modest resistance the trade unions have put up since 1936 against Soviet influence is the most serious sign of their decline; it is thus understandable how even those most faithful to the heroic tradition of trade unionism lose their reluctance

to allow it to submit to the French state, when they see it being docile before the Russian state.

There is no doubt that if the Labour Statute is adopted and implemented without important modifications, French trade unionism will have ceased to be. It will then be quickly seen that it is troublesome to entrust an organisation drawing together only a part of the working class with diplomatic functions, while the totality of workers having interests in a conflict will be charged with making the decisions. It will be almost inevitable that the so-called most representative organisation should enlarged until it mandates drawing together all employees. Whether the trade unions will then be apolitical is another question; no legislation or statute can decide in advance whether an organisation will or will not have a political role. What is certain is that a single and mandatory organisation can play no independent political role; it cannot but be conformist.

3

[WORKER BOREDOM]

Although passions play an often disastrous role in human relations, it is vain
273 to think one can remove a passion by decree; one can remove its cause, one can also, and this is always easier, change its course. Have the needs of the soul that have made trade union activity among the workers over the course of the last half century something passionate, tense and violent disappeared? Will they be satisfied within the proposed professional organisation or will they turn elsewhere, and in what direction? And, first of all, what are they? What moral sufferings, in addition to the worry about their interests, have pushed the workers, year after year, to the form of action with which recent history presents us?

First suffering, the workers are bored. Boredom is a common enough evil in our time and perhaps a key cause of contemporary catastrophes. Though generally shared, it nonetheless sets social groups against each other because, since it is not a matter of material fact, each group believes it alone suffers from it. The country-folk are bored and believe that fun is being had everywhere except the countryside. The workers are bored and cannot imagine that an engineer's office might be a place of crushing boredom. To stay with the workers, the boredom of workers, if one sets aside a few fortunate occupations, is really a particularly heavy burden. This is due, first of all, to

obedience. In one sense all those who work obey insofar as their tasks are imposed on them from outside; but within the context of any determinate task each organises his time to a greater or lesser extent. A top boss gives directives to a factory director, he does not require him to do this thing from three to four o'clock on that day, this other thing from four to five o'clock, and so on. Extreme obedience is obedience that takes away all power to organise one's time, that is, the order in which someone performs his own work. This obedience is the lot of factory workers, no matter the size of the factory, and more generally of most lower-level employees; the boredom that accompanies it is, without the least exaggeration, unbearable. This boredom is, of course, aggravated by the monotony of the task. In bad times it is infinitely multiplied by the fear which forces the imagination to avoid any evocation at all of possible changes; because as the changes can hardly be other than bad, making misery draw that little bit closer, the interminable and monotonous continuation of the present boredom is the only object of hope.

For my part, I will never forget with what force the scene of the workers' 274
boredom struck me one day while I was visiting a riveting workshop with pneumatic rivet guns in a small provincial factory. The head of the workshop, only recently qualified for the job and still looking like a worker, beamed with joy doing a job where every day he had to do some inventive work, where he was subject to almost no control and to which he devoted himself wholeheartedly. Around him men, or rather shadows of men, clung to their rivet guns amidst a terrible noise, faces haggard through fatigue, suffering, boredom, and a total absence of interest or hope in anything at all. The difference between his fate and theirs certainly infinitely surpassed the difference in their salaries.

Boredom acts differently on the different individuals who make up the working masses. Some, who suffer it for too long or in a form too harsh, or who are physically or mentally weak, succumb to it. They no longer desire anything, they suffer a kind of mental death which, were it to extend to all, would be a guarantee of social tranquillity but would certainly be a catastrophe worse than all the unrest. The others react to it or try to do so. Some of them attempt, at times with success, to "get on," to move up the ranks in the industrial hierarchy. But there are others among them, and they are more numerous than one thinks, for whom this idea of getting on in their line of work, though it evokes the benefits of money, does not speak to the soul;

for they have come to hate the place where they go to work every day as a prisoner hates the wall of his cell.

These people seek within trade unionism primarily the new, the adventurous, something that is violently opposed, in its atmosphere, its spirit, its goal and its hopes, to daily life so well-known, too well-known. They are glad to defend their interests, to win pay raises, but such activity would seem dismal and bland to them were it not surrounded, as if by a halo, by an atmosphere of struggle and by the prospect, more or less distant and always vague, of a total upheaval that must bring in its wake a life completely new, completely fresh, completely suffused with enthusiasm. Some level-headed people say that these are unreasonable ideas; no doubt, but the inhuman boredom to which these men are subjected is also unreasonable and they
275 are not wrong to resist it even with the aid of violent imagery. Thanks to this atmosphere and these prospects, the fact of getting a union card, of going to trade union meetings, gives the life of these workers, to a greater or lesser degree depending on circumstances, a bit of that romance indispensable to human life. Let the law make trade union dues mandatory and the trade union organisation, having become a mere administration of workers interests, will become something as boring as all the administrative bodies of which workers are either beneficiaries or victims. The act of joining a union, instead of being the consequence of a free, sometimes adventurous, decision, will be no more than another of the many acts of obedience imposed on workers in the barracks life which is so often theirs during a great many hours of the day.

Second suffering, the workers own nothing and they are, even those who live relatively well, acutely and painfully aware of the fact that they own nothing. In this way, a well-paid worker is very close to a badly-paid worker and far, for example, from a small trader who lives perhaps as hard a life or harder than he does, but who owns his stock in trade. Even those workers who have never known grinding poverty—and most of them have known it at some point in their lives—feel at all times that they are kept from it by the good will of others. Even in very small factories where the boss is surrounded by workers whom he knows and who have known him for 10 or 20 years, the atmosphere is not, as is so often said, familial; for a child feels at home in his father's house, whereas the worker can never feel at home in the place where he works, because one word can drive him out and because on any day at all an unfortunate quarrel can culminate in this

word. Hanging over the worker at the job site or factory is always not only the risk of an occasional mistake, not only the risk that might result from militant action, should he want to undertake it, but also the risk of giving offence. His wages, high or low, are never his own. But what makes this situation painful above all is that the law protects only property; it does not protect human life. Of course, the law punishes murder—though it punishes it, most often, much less harshly than repeated theft—but it does not set up anything to prevent the dying of one who finds no way to live. Property appears in the law as sacred everywhere, life nowhere. So the workers always feel more or less outside the law, strangers to society; even if they enjoy some 276
societal benefits, they have the feeling that society does nothing for them, because they have the feeling that they possess no rights. They do not feel citizens of such a Republic.

This results in part in a certain mistrust, a certain hostility, toward the state and the law; and in part in a kind of thirst for property. This thirst is sometimes assuaged in part by the acquisition of small houses or small gardens; but most often it is not for anything material, it is a thirst for spiritual property. The great appeal of workers' organisations is that the workers consider them as their own. A worker in the new towns on the outskirts is often quite happy to have a socialist or communist local authority, even if he is of neither party, because he can go to the town hall and feel at home there, he who is at home nowhere. It is the same for the trade union. The workers organisations, in addition, are always projecting a dazzling, brand new society on the horizon that will be the property of the workers, who will have built it from scratch and where they will be at home everywhere. These men who own nothing in the present console themselves with the illusion that they own the whole future and they view as an enemy anyone who tries to destroy this illusion. To offer them a more comfortable life in a society where they would indefinitely continue to own nothing, and where property would indefinitely continue to be the basis of the law, is a bad joke which has no chance of turning out well for them; it is to offer to sell them a mess of pottage for their hope, their only property.

Mandatory trade unions would no longer be their own, since they would have been imposed on them; they would belong to the state, to that state in which the workers feel themselves strangers. The labour exchanges and the union houses would be administrative bodies. If one adds to this that the amount of the union dues and the number of matters to be dealt with

would almost inevitably turn the trade unions into bureaucracies run by professionals, even more than today, then it will be understood that the trade unions would become yet another of those official places where workers go with a mixture of timidity, embarrassment, mistrust and silent resentment to speak to men just as official, in whose eyes they are nothing but units.

Third suffering, the workers feel humiliated. Of course, they do not say so: humilia[tion]

[the end of the text is missing]

Oeuvres complètes II:3

Auguste Detoeuf—founder of Alsthom, where Weil had done some factory work in 1935—was a French industrialist who was publicly active in fostering cooperation between workers and management. In 1938 he gave lecture on the future of trade unions, and in February and March of that year Weil drafted three responses to it. While incomplete, taken together they describe Weil's insight that bureaucracy was yet another form of oppression and that workers needed something more profound than higher wages and better working conditions.

3

LET'S NOT START THE TROJAN WAR AGAIN

We live in an age where the relative security brought to men by a certain technical domination over nature is largely offset by the dangers of ruins and massacres that conflicts between human groups create. If the peril is more grave, this is no doubt due in part to the power of the instruments of destruction that technology has put into our hands; but these instruments do not go off on their own, and it is not honest to want to land inert matter with a situation for which we bear full responsibility. The most threatening conflicts have a common character that might reassure superficial minds, but which, despite appearances, constitutes the true danger; *this is that they do not have a definable objective*. Throughout human history, one can confirm that unquestionably the most fierce conflicts are those which had no objective. This paradox, once it has been seen clearly, is perhaps one of the keys to history; it is probably the key to our age. 49

When there is a struggle around a well-defined stake, each one can weigh up the value of this stake and the probable cost of the struggle and decide to what extent it will be worth making the effort; it is not in general too difficult to find a compromise that is worth more for each of the opposing parties, than even a victorious battle. But when a struggle has no objective, there is no common measure, there is no balance, no proportion, no

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50 possible comparison; a compromise is not even conceivable; the importance of the battle is then measured solely by the sacrifices it demands and since, by that very fact, the sacrifices already made perpetually call for new sacrifices, there would be no reason to stop killing and dying, unless by good fortune human strength ends up finding its limit. This paradox is so powerful that it escapes analysis. However, all so-called educated men know of the most perfect example; yet a kind of inevitability makes us read without comprehending.

The Greeks and the Trojans once massacred each other for ten years on account of Helen. None among them, except the amateur warrior Paris, cared one bit that it was about Helen; all agreed in deploring that she had ever been born. Her person was so obviously out of proportion with this gigantic battle that in the eyes of all she represented merely the symbol of what was truly at stake, as for what was truly at stake, no one defined it and it could not be defined, for it did not exist. Furthermore it could not be measured. Its importance was imagined simply by the deaths achieved and the massacres expected. Therefore this importance surpassed all assignable limit. Hector foresaw that his city was going to be destroyed, his father and his brothers massacred, his wife degraded by a slavery worse than death; Achilles knew that he was delivering his father to the miseries and humiliations of an old age without defence; the bulk of them knew that their homes would be destroyed by so long an absence; none reckoned that this was paying too much, because all were pursuing a nothing whose value was measured solely by the price that had to be paid. To shame the Greeks who were proposing that everyone return home, Minerva and Ulysses believed they had found a sufficient argument in evoking the sufferings of their dead comrades. At a distance of three thousand years, one finds in their mouths and in the mouth of Poincaré exactly the same argument to tarnish proposals for a negotiated peace. In our time, to explain the sombre persistence of piling up pointless ruins, popular imagination sometimes has recourse to supposed intrigues by economic cabals. But there is no need to look so far. The Greeks in Homer's time did not have organised bronze merchants, nor a Committee of Blacksmiths. Truth be told, in the mind of Homer's contemporaries, the role that we attribute to mysterious economic oligarchies was
51 held by the gods of Greek mythology. But to drive men to the most absurd catastrophes, there is no need for gods nor for secret conspiracies. Human nature suffices.

For those who know how to see, there is today no more worrisome symptom than the unreal character of most emerging conflicts. They have even less reality than the conflict between the Greeks and the Trojans. At the centre of the Trojan War, there was at least a woman, and what is more a perfectly beautiful woman. For our contemporaries, it is words embellished with capital letters that play Helen's role. If, trying to get a grip on it, we take one of these words all swollen with blood and tears, we find it without content. Words that have a content and a sense are not murderous. If sometimes one of them gets mixed up in bloodshed, it is more likely by accident rather than inevitability, and it then generally involves a limited and effective action. But when one puts in capital letters words empty of meaning, then should circumstances encourage it, men will shed torrents of blood, and pile ruins upon ruins repeating these words, without ever being able to find something that actually corresponds to them; nothing real ever can correspond to them, since they mean nothing. Success is then defined exclusively by crushing groups of men professing rival words; for it is another characteristic of these words that they exist as opposing pairs. Of course, it is not always on their own that such words are empty of sense; some among them could have one, if someone took the trouble to define them properly. But a word so defined forfeits its capital letter, it can no longer serve as a flag nor hold its ground against the clatter of enemy slogans; it is no more than a model to help grasp a concrete reality, or a concrete object, or a method of action. Clarifying these concepts, discrediting words congenitally empty, defining the usage of others by precise analyses, here is, strange as it may seem, work that could save human lives.

For this work, our age seems more or less unfit. Our civilisation covers with its lustre a true intellectual decadence. We grant no special place, in our mind, for superstition, analogous to Greek mythology, and superstition revenges itself by invading the entire domain of thought under the cover of an abstract vocabulary. Our science contains, like a shop, the most refined 52
intellectual mechanisms for resolving the most complex problems, but we are almost incapable of applying the elementary methods of rational thought. In every domain we seem to have lost the concepts essential to intelligence, the concepts of limit, measure, degree, proportion, relation, ratio, condition, necessary connection, connection between means and outcomes. Keeping with human affairs, our political universe is peopled exclusively with myths and monsters, in it we know only abstract entities, only absolutes. Every word

of political and social vocabulary could serve as an example. Nation, security, capitalism, communism, fascism, order, authority, property, democracy, one could take them all one after the other. Never do we place them in formulations such as: There is democracy to the extent that . . . , or again: There is capitalism on condition that . . . The use of expressions of the type "to the extent that" exceeds our intellectual ability. Each one of these words seems to represent an absolute reality, independent of all conditions, or an absolute goal, independent of all modes of action, or again an absolute evil; and at the same time, under each of these words, we put successively or even simultaneously anything at all. We live in the midst of various, changing realities determined by the shifting play of external necessities, being transformed as a function of certain conditions and within certain limits; but we act, we struggle, we sacrifice ourselves and others on behalf of abstractions that are crystallised, isolated, and impossible to put in relation to each other or to concrete things. Our so-called technological age knows only how to tilt at windmills.

One has thus only to look around to find examples of murderous absurdities. The prime example, is the antagonisms between nations. One often thinks to explain them by saying that they simply conceal capitalist antagonisms, but one forgets a fact right in front of us, it is that the network of capitalist rivalries and complexities, struggles and alliances that stretch across the world, does not correspond at all to the division of the world into nations. The contest of interests can place in opposition two French groups, while allying each of them with a German group. The German manufacturing industry can be considered with hostility by French engineering enterprises; but it makes hardly any difference to mining companies whether iron from Lorraine is processed in France or in Germany, and vintners, Parisian goods manufacturers and others have an interest in the prosperity of German industry. These elementary truths make unintelligible the current explanation of rivalries between nations. If one says that nationalism always masks capitalist appetites, one has to say whose appetites. The collieries? Heavy industry? Machine building? Electricity suppliers? Textile industry? The banks? It cannot be all of them as a group, since their interests do not coincide; and if one has in mind a subsection of capitalism, then again one would have to explain why that subsection has taken control of the state. It is true that the politics of a state always coincide at any given moment with the interests of some capitalist sector; one has therefore a catch-all explanation

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which by the very fact of its inadequacy applies to anything at all. Given the international movement of capital, it is also hard to see why a capitalist would seek protection from his own state rather than a foreign state, or would find it more difficult to use the means of pressure and seduction at his disposal on foreign statesmen than on his countrymen. The structure of the world economy corresponds to the political structure of the world only to the extent that states exercise their authority in economic matters; but also the direction in which that authority is exercised cannot be explained by the simple contest of economic interests. When one examines the content of the words: national interest, one does not even find the interest of capitalist enterprises there. "One believes one is dying for one's country," said Anatole France; "one dies for some industrialists."[1] That would still be too noble. One is not even dying for something as substantial, as tangible as an industrialist.

The national interest can be defined neither as a common interest of the large industrial, commercial or banking enterprises of a country, since that common interest does not exist, nor by the life, liberty and well-being of the citizens, since one continually calls upon them to sacrifice their well-being, their liberty and their life for the national interest. In the final reckoning, if one examines modern history, one reaches the conclusion that national interest is for each state the capacity to wage war. In 1911 France almost went to war for Morocco; but why was Morocco so important? On account 54
of the reserve of cannon fodder that North Africa was to become, on account of the interest a country has, from the point of view of war, to make its economy as independent as possible through the possession of raw materials and markets. What a country calls a vital economic interest is not what permits its citizens to live, it is what allows it to wage war; petroleum is far more prone to incite international conflicts than wheat. Thus, when one wages war, it is to maintain or add to the means to do so. All international politics cycles around this vicious circle. What one calls national prestige consists in acting in a manner always to give the impression to other countries that one is sure to defeat them eventually, so as to demoralise them. What one calls national security, is a chimerical state of affairs where one would retain the possibility of waging war by depriving all other countries of it. In sum, a

1 Open letter from July 1922.

self-respecting nation is ready for anything, including war, rather than giving up waging war eventually. But why must it be able to wage war? No one knows this any better than the Trojans knew why they had to keep Helen. That is why the good will of statesmen who are friends of peace is so ineffective. If countries were divided by real conflicts of interest, one would find satisfactory compromises. But when economic and political interests make sense only from the point of view of war, how can they be reconciled peacefully? It is the very concept of nation that should be eliminated. Or rather the use of this word: for the word national and the expressions of which it is a part are empty of all meaning, they have no content other than the millions of corpses, the orphans, the maimed, the despair, and the tears.

Another admirable example of bloodstained absurdity is the opposition between fascism and communism. The fact that this opposition defines for us today a double threat of civil war and of world war is perhaps the gravest symptom of intellectual deficiency among all those that we can observe around us. For if one examines the sense that these two terms have today, one finds two almost identical political and social conceptions. On each side, it is the same control of the state over almost all forms of individual and social life; the same frenzied militarisation; the same artificial unanimity, obtained
55 through coercion, to profit a single party which is confused for the state and defines itself by this confusion; the same regime of servitude imposed by the state on the working masses in lieu of traditional wage-earning. There are no two nations whose structure is more similar than Germany and Russia, which mutually threaten each other with an international crusade, each one feigning to take the other as the Beast of the Apocalypse. This is why one can safely assert that the opposition between fascism and communism is strictly speaking senseless. Thus the victory of fascism cannot be defined except as the extermination of communists, and the victory of communism as the extermination of fascists. It is obvious that, in these conditions, anti-fascism and anti-communism are themselves also devoid of sense. The position of anti-fascists is: anything rather than fascism; anything, including fascism under the name of communism. The position of the anti-communists is: anything rather than communism, anything, including communism under the name of fascism. For this fine cause, everyone, in the two camps, is resigned in advance to die, and above all to kill. During the Summer of 1932, in Berlin, a small crowd frequently formed in the street around two workers or two petty-bourgeois, one communist, the other Nazi, who were

arguing with each other; they always realised after a while that they were vigorously defending the same programme, and this realisation induced vertigo in them, but increased in each of them still further the hatred against an adversary so quintessentially enemy that he remained an enemy when espousing the same ideas. Since then, four and a half years have passed; German communists are still tortured by the Nazis in concentration camps, and it is not certain that France is not threatened by a war of extermination between anti-fascists and anti-communists. If such a war were to take place, the Trojan War would be by comparison a model of good sense, for even if one accepts with a Greek poet that in Troy there was only the phantom of Helen, the phantom of Helen is still a substantial reality next to the opposition between fascism and communism.

The opposition between dictatorship and democracy, which resembles that between order and liberty, is at least a true opposition. However it loses its sense if one considers each term as an abstract entity, as one most often does these days, rather than taking it as a model for measuring the characteristics of a social structure. It is clear that nowhere is there absolute dictatorship nor absolute democracy, but that social organisation is always and everywhere, to varying degrees, a composite of democracy and dictatorship; it is also clear that the degree of democracy is defined by the relationships that link the different cogs of the social machine, and depends on the conditions that determine the functioning of this machine; it is therefore these relations and these conditions upon which one must try to act. Instead of this it is generally considered that there are human groups, nations or parties which intrinsically incarnate dictatorship or democracy, so that, depending on whether one's temperament moves one to uphold order above all or liberty above all, one is obsessed by the desire to crush one or the other of these groups. Many French believe in good faith for example that a military victory of France over Germany would be a victory for democracy. In their eyes, liberty inheres in the French nation and tyranny in the German nation, somewhat as for Molière's contemporaries an inherent, dormitive power lay in opium. If one day the so-called necessities "of national defence" make France an entrenched camp where the whole nation is entirely subject to military authority, and if France thus transformed enters into war with Germany, those French will be killed, not without having killed as many Germans as possible, with the touching illusion of shedding their blood for democracy. It does not cross their mind that the dictatorship was able to

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establish itself in Germany thanks to a specific situation; and that creating a different situation for Germany that makes possible a certain loosening of state authority would be perhaps more effective than killing the young boys of Berlin and Hamburg.

To take another example, if one dares to expound the idea of an armistice in Spain before a party man, he will respond with indignation, if he is a man of the right, that one must fight to the end for the victory of order and the crushing of the creators of anarchy; he will respond with no less indignation, if he is a man of the left, that one must fight to the end for the liberty of the people, for the well-being of the labouring masses, for the crushing of the oppressors and the exploiters. The first forgets that no political regime, whatever it may be, contains disorders that can come close to equalling those
57 of civil war, with its systematic destruction, recurrent massacres on the front line, loss of production, and the hundreds of individual crimes committed daily in both camps because any and every thug has a rifle in his hand. The man of the left forgets for his part that, even in his own camp, the necessities of civil war, the state of siege, the militarisation of the front and of the rear, the police terror, the elimination of any restraints on arbitrariness and of any individual security, supress liberty much more radically than would the accession to power of a party of the extreme right; he forgets that the costs of war, the ruins, and the slowing down of production condemn the people, and for a long time, to privations much more cruel than would be caused by their exploiters. The man of the right and the man of the left both forget that the long months of civil war have little by little brought to the two camps an almost identical regime. Each of them has lost his ideal without realising it, by replacing it with an empty abstract entity; for each of them, the victory of what he still calls his idea cannot be defined except through the extermination of the adversary; and each of them, if one talks to him of peace, will respond with contempt with the clinching argument, the argument of Minerva in Homer, the argument of Poincaré in 1917, "The dead do not want it."

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What is today called *class struggle*, a term that would require clarification, is of all the conflicts that pit human groups against each other the best grounded, the most serious, and one could perhaps say the only serious one; but only

to the extent that no imaginary abstract entities intervene there to inhibit all purposeful action, focus efforts into a vacuum, and lead to the danger of inexpiable hatred, wanton destruction, and mindless killings. What is legitimate, vital, and essential is the eternal struggle of those who obey against those who command when the mechanism of social power is resulting in the crushing of human dignity among those down below. This struggle is eternal because those who command always, whether they know it or not, tend to trample on the human dignity beneath them. Commanding, however it is exercised, cannot, except for specific cases, respect the humanity in the person of the agents executing orders. If it is exercised as if men were 58
things, and moreover without any resistance, it is inevitably exercised over exceptionally pliant things; for the man subjected to the threat of death, which in the final analysis is the supreme sanction of any authority, can become more pliable than inert matter. As long as there is a stable social hierarchy, whatever form it might take, those below will have to fight not to lose all the rights of a human being. On the other hand the resistance of those above, even if it ordinarily appears contrary to justice, also rests on concrete reasons. First of all personal reasons; excepting the case of a rather rare generosity, the privileged are averse to losing part of their material or moral privileges. But also more elevated reasons. Those who are invested with command feel it is their mission to defend the order indispensable to all social life, and they do not conceive another possible order besides the one that exists. They are not entirely wrong, for until this other order has in fact been established, one cannot assert with certainty that it will be possible; that is precisely why there cannot be social progress unless the pressure from below is sufficient to effect change in power relations, and thus compel actually establishing new social relations. The encounter between the pressure from below and the resistance from above thus continually creates an unstable equilibrium, that at every moment defines the structure of a society. This encounter is a struggle, but it is not a war; it can turn into a war in certain circumstances, but there is no inevitability about it. Antiquity has not bequeathed us only a history of interminable and useless massacres around Troy, it has also left us a history of vigorous and unanimous action by which the Roman plebeians, without shedding a drop of blood, got out of a condition that approached slavery and won the institution of tribunes as a guarantee of their new rights. In exactly the same way the French workers, through the occupation of factories, but without violence, imposed the

recognition of some basic rights, and as a guarantee of these rights the
59 institution of elected delegates.

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Early Rome had however a serious advantage over modern France. In social matters she knew neither abstractions, nor abstract entities, nor words in capitals, nor isms; nothing that risks nullifying our most intense efforts, or causing the social struggle to degenerate into a war as ruinous, as bloody, and as absurd from just about any point of view as the war between nations. One can take almost any of these terms, all the expressions of our political vocabulary, and open them; at the centre one will find a void. What would one want to say for example about the slogan, so popular during elections, "fight against the trusts"? A trust is an economic monopoly located in the hands of monied powers which they use not in the best public interest, but to increase their power. What is the harm in that? It is the fact that a monopoly serves as a tool for a will to power alien to the public good. Yet, it is not this fact that one seeks to eliminate, but the fact, indifferent in itself, that this will to power is that of an economic oligarchy. One proposes to substitute the state for these oligarchies, which also has its will to power just as alien to the public good; moreover, it is no longer a matter of the state as an economic but as a military power, and as a result much more dangerous for the good people who enjoy living. Reciprocally, on the bourgeois side, what can one really understand by their hostility to the doctrine of economic statism, while accepting private monopolies, which incorporate all the economic and technical drawbacks of state monopolies, and maybe others as well? One could make a long list of slogans thus grouped into pairs, and all equally illusory. Those above are relatively inoffensive, but that is not the case for all.

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What then can possibly be in the minds of those for whom the word 'capitalism' represents absolute evil? We live in a society that comprises forms of coercion and oppression too often crushing for the masses of human beings who are subject to them, very painful inequalities, and a great deal
60 of useless torture. On the other hand, this society is characterised, from an economic point of view, by certain modes of production, consumption, exchange, that are moreover in perpetual transformation and that depend on certain fundamental relationships between the production and movement

of goods, between the movement of goods and money, and between money and production, between money and consumption. This diverse and changing assemblage of economic phenomena is arbitrarily crystallised into an abstraction impossible to define, and then, under the name of capitalism, one links this abstraction to all the suffering one undergoes or sees around oneself. Getting to this point is enough for a man of character to devote his life to the destruction of capitalism or, what comes to the same thing, to the revolution; for this word revolution has today only this purely negative meaning.

Since the destruction of capitalism has no meaning, due to the fact that capitalism is an abstraction, since it does not entail a definite number of precise changes made to the regime—such changes being treated disdainfully as "reforms"—it can only mean the crushing of capitalists and more generally of all those who do not declare themselves against capitalism. It is apparently easier to kill, and even to die, than to ask oneself some very simple questions, such as these: do the laws, the conventions, that currently govern economic life form a system? To what extent is there a necessary connection between such and such economic phenomenon and the others? At what point will the change to such and such economic laws have repercussions for others? To what extent do the sufferings imposed by the social relationships of our age depend on such and such conventions of our economic life; to what extent on the entirety of these conventions? To what extent do they have as causes other factors, either durable factors that will persist after the transformation of our economic organisation or, on the contrary factors that one could eliminate without putting an end to what we call the regime? What new suffering, either transient or permanent, would the process of carrying out one such transformation necessarily involve? What new suffering would be risked to bring about the new social organisation that one would institute? If one studied these problems seriously, one could 61
perhaps come to have something in mind when one says that capitalism is an evil; but it would be only a relative evil, and a transformation of the social regime could only be proposed with a view to arriving at a lesser evil. Again this should only be a matter of a specific transformation.

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This whole critique could equally well be applied to the other camp by replacing the preoccupation with suffering inflicted on the lower social strata with the worry about safeguarding order, and the desire for transformation with the desire for preservation. The bourgeois readily treat as agents of disorder all

those who envisage the end of capitalism, and sometimes even those who wish to reform it, because they are ignorant of to what extent and depending on what circumstances the various economic relationships that together form what one currently calls capitalism can be considered the conditions for order. Many among them, not knowing which change could be dangerous or not, prefer to preserve everything, without realising that preservation amidst changing circumstances itself constitutes an alteration whose consequences could be disorder. Most invoke economic laws as religiously as if they were Antigone's unwritten laws, although they see them changing daily before their eyes. For them also, the preservation of the capitalist regime is an expression devoid of sense, since they are ignorant of what needs to be preserved, under which conditions and to what extent: this can mean in practice nothing but crushing all those who speak of the end of the regime. The struggle between opponents and defenders of capitalism, this struggle between innovators who don't know what to innovate and preservationists who don't know what to preserve, is a blind struggle of the blind, a struggle in a vacuum, which for this very reason risks turning into an extermination. One can make the same remarks about the struggle which unfolds within the narrower framework of industrial enterprises. A worker, in general, instinctively connects the boss to all the suffering he undergoes in the factory; he does not ask himself whether in any other property system the management of the enterprise would not still impose on him some of the
62 same suffering, or else perhaps identical suffering, or maybe even increased suffering; neither does he ask himself what part of this suffering could be eliminated, by removing the causes, without touching the current property system. For him, the struggle "against the boss" becomes confused with the irrepressible protest of the human being crushed by a life too hard to bear. The boss, on his side, rightly worries about his authority. Except that, the role of the boss' authority consists exclusively in setting the direction of production, optimally co-ordinating the elements of the work and controlling, by recourse to some compulsion, proper execution of the work; any organisation of the company, whatever it be, where this co-ordination and control can be appropriately secured, gives the boss a sufficient degree of authority. For the boss, however, the sense that he has of his authority depends above all on a certain atmosphere of submission and respect which is not necessarily connected to the proper execution of the work: and above all, when he sees a latent or overt revolt among his workforce, he always attributes it to

some individuals, while in reality revolt, whether noisy, or silent, aggressive or stifled by despair, is inseparable from any physically or morally oppressive existence. If, for the worker, the struggle "against the boss" merges with the feeling of dignity, for the boss the struggle against the "ringleaders" merges with the concern for his position and his professional conscience; in both cases these are empty efforts, and are therefore not likely to be confined within a reasonable limit. While one observes that strikes organised around set demands lead without too much harm to an agreement, one has seen strikes that resemble wars in the sense that for neither one side nor the other did the struggle have an objective; strikes where one could see nothing real or tangible, nothing, expect the halt in production, deterioration of machines, misery, hunger, women's tears, and under-nourishment of children; and the determination was such on both sides that it gave the impression it would never end. In such situations, civil war exists already in nascent form. 63

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If one analysed in this manner all the words, all the phrases that have thus roused, throughout human history, the spirit of sacrifice and of cruelty in any combination, one would no doubt find them all similarly empty. Yet, all these abstract entities greedy for human blood must surely have some sort of relation to real life. Indeed they do have one. There was perhaps only the phantom of Helen in Troy, but the Greek army and the Trojan army were not phantoms; likewise, although the word "nation" and the expressions of which it is a part are meaningless, the different states, with their offices, their prisons, their arsenals, their barracks, and their customs houses are very real. The theoretical distinction between the two forms of totalitarian regime, fascism and communism, is imaginary, but in Germany, in 1932, there actually existed two political organisations each of which aspired to total power and therefore the elimination of the other. A democratic party can become little by little a party of dictatorship, but it remains nonetheless distinct from the dictatorial party it strives to crush; France may, in order to defend itself against Germany, in its turn submit to a totalitarian regime, but the French state and the German state will remain nonetheless two distinct states. Destruction and preservation of capitalism are slogans without content, but organisations are ranged behind these slogans. Each empty abstraction corresponds to a human group. The abstractions for which this

is not the case remain harmless; conversely groups that have not emitted abstract entities have some chance of not being dangerous. Jules Romains magnificently represented this particular species of emission when he puts into Knock's mouth the maxim, "Above the patient's interest and the doctor's interest, there is the interest of medicine."[2] That was a comic moment simply because an abstract entity of this kind has not yet emerged from the medical organisations; such abstract entities are always the product of bodies whose common character is holding onto a power or aiming for power. All the absurdities that make history look like a long delirium have their root in one essential absurdity, the nature of power. The necessity that there be a
64 power is tangible, palpable, because order is indispensable to existence; but the allocation of power is arbitrary, because men are alike or almost so; but it must not appear arbitrary, otherwise there is no power. Prestige, that is to say illusion, is thus at the very heart of power. All power lies in the relations between human activities; but to be stable, a power must appear as something absolute, intangible, to those who hold it, to those subject to it, and to external powers. The conditions of order are essentially contradictory, and men seem to have the choice between the anarchy that accompanies weak powers, and wars of every kind provoked by the concern with prestige.

Translated into the language of power, the absurdities enumerated here cease to appear as such. Isn't it natural that every state should define the national interest by the capacity to wage war, since it is surrounded by other states capable, if they see it as weak, of subjugating it by arms? One sees there is no middle ground between holding one's place in the race to prepare for war, or being ready to suffer anything from other armed states. General disarmament would overcome this difficulty only if it were complete, which is scarcely conceivable. Moreover, a state cannot appear weak to the outside without also risking giving those who obey it the temptation to shake off some of its authority. If Priam and Hector had surrendered Helen to the Greeks, they would have risked inspiring even further the desire in the Greeks to sack a city apparently so ill-prepared to defend itself; they also would have risked a general uprising within Troy; not because the restitution of Helen would have outraged the Trojans, but because it would have given them the impression that the men whom they obeyed were not so powerful.

2 Jules Romain, *Knock*, Act III, Scene VI, although this is not an actual line in the play but an amalgamation of several lines.

If one of the two camps in Spain gave the impression of desiring peace, this would first encourage their enemies, and with it would increase their offensive value; and then it would risk uprisings among their own. Likewise, for a man who is committed neither to the anti-communist bloc nor to the anti-fascist bloc, the conflict of two nearly identical ideologies might appear ridiculous; but once these blocs exist, those who find themselves in one of the two necessarily consider the other as absolute evil, because it will crush them if they are not stronger; the leaders of both sides should appear ready to crush the enemy to preserve their authority over their troops; and when these blocs have reached a certain power, neutrality becomes practically an 65
almost untenable position. Same again when in any social hierarchy those below them fear being totally crushed if they do not dispossess their superiors, and should one or the other then become strong enough to have nothing more to fear, they will not withstand intoxication of power fuelled by grievance. In general, all power is essentially fragile; it must therefore defend itself, or else how would there be a minimum of stability in social life? But offence appears almost always, wrongly or rightly, as the sole defensive tactic, and that on all sides. It is natural moreover that it be mainly imaginary arguments that incite irresolvable conflicts, because they arise solely in terms of power and prestige. It is arguably easier for France to accord Germany raw materials rather than a few acres of land christened colony, easier for Germany to forgo raw materials rather than the word colony. The essential contradiction of human society is that every social situation rests on a balance of forces, a balance of pressures analogous to fluid-balance; but prestige cannot be balanced, prestige has no limits, any gratification of prestige is an attack on the prestige or dignity of others. And yet prestige is inseparable from power. There seems to be an impasse here which humanity cannot get past except by a miracle. But human life is made of miracles. Who would believe a gothic cathedral could remain standing, if one did not see it every day? Since in fact there is not always war, it is not an impossibility for there to be peace indefinitely. A problem posed with all its real data is considerably closer to being resolved. The problem of international and civil peace has never before been thus posed.

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It is the cloud of empty abstract entities that not only prevents perceiving the data of the problem, but even feeling there is a problem to be resolved and

not an inevitability to be endured. These abstract entities stupefy minds; not only do they kill, but, what is infinitely more grave, they make one forget the value of life. The *hunt for abstract entities* in all areas of political and social
66 life is an urgent work of public health. It is no easy hunt; the whole intellectual atmosphere of our age promotes the flowering and multiplication of abstract entities. One might ask whether by reforming the methods of scientific education and popularisation, by hunting down the crass superstition which became established there thanks to an artificial vocabulary, by restoring to minds the correct use of locutions of the type *to the extent that, insofar as, on condition that, in relation to*, by discrediting all the vicious reasoning that amounts to making people accept that there is an inherent dormitive power in opium, one would not render our contemporaries a first-rate, practical service. A general elevation of the intellectual level would singularly encourage every effort of clarification deflating the imaginary causes of conflict. Admittedly we do not lack people preaching appeasement in all spheres; but in general these sermons have the aim not of stimulating the intelligence and eliminating false conflicts, but of sedating and smothering real conflicts. These fancy talkers who, when declaiming about international peace, understand by that expression the indefinite maintenance of the *status quo* to the exclusive profit of the French state, those who, by recommending social peace, intend to preserve intact the privileges or at least subordinate any change to the goodwill of the privileged, these are the most dangerous enemies of international and civil peace. It is not a matter of artificially freezing the essentially variable relationships of force, which those who are suffering will always seek to change; it is a matter of distinguishing the imaginary and the real so as to diminish the risks of war without renouncing the struggle, which Heraclitus said is the condition of life.

Oeuvres complètes II:3

Published in the journal *Nouveaux Cahiers* in April 1937, in this article Weil reflects her frustrations with the intractable conflicts in European politics during the inter-war years. These, she argues, are born from the failure to think in concrete terms about definite relations among people. So long as thought is unmoored in a sea of abstractions, no one will ever conceive conditions for compromise, coexistence and toleration that can be met by others.

4

LEGITIMACY OF THE PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

Legitimacy is one of those beautiful words to which the human mind is unable to attach any conception, but which, as words, have an inherent power infinitely greater than any human conception. 383

If one tries to define one of these words by way of a human conception, it loses all its inherent power and becomes a cause of evil.

Truth and justice are such words. God foremost of all. These words are alive. "The word of God is alive, and active, and sharper by far than any double-sided sword, and distinguishes the thoughts and sentiments of the heart."[1] 384

Without being able to answer Pontius Pilate's question, "What is truth?" one must be absolutely certain that one prefers truth, whatever it might be, to falsehood, whatever it might be. When one has made this choice in respect of all things, without any exception, unconditionally, definitively, with no going back, for all eternity, thought comes closer to truth with each effort of attention. That is completely certain.

If, on the contrary, one assimilates truth to a well-established system of opinions, as does the Catholic idea of orthodoxy, of which the Inquisition

1 Heb 4:12.

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is the direct consequence, one casts oneself into darkness. This is so whatever the system of opinions chosen. This is exactly the case with legitimacy. This beautiful word has a marvellous, inherent power through the ability it possesses to direct intention, desire and will. It produces evil if one wants to define it through a human conception, or through forms of government.

A king can be legitimate. A head of parliamentary government can be so. A king can be illegitimate; a head of |*republican*| parliamentary government can also be so, though all due formalities might have been observed.

A head of state governs a country legitimately if he desires above all other things to be a legitimate head, and if almost the whole of the people regard him as being a legitimate head and feel that he desires to remain so.

The forms of political institutions primarily have the purpose of allowing the leader and the people to express their feelings. They are the analogue of love letters, of exchanges of rings or of other mementoes between lovers. There are milieux where a woman does not believe herself truly married if she does not wear a gold wedding ring. Though it is not the ring which constitutes the conjugal union. Nonetheless, women with this mindset have to wear a wedding ring.

Political institutions are inherently a symbolic language. A language is never an arbitrary thing, a convention; far from it, it grows like a plant.

What today makes the French problem so agonising is that there is no language capable of speaking to the hearts of the French people.

The sentiment of legitimacy has never been strong among them. Royalty ceased to be legitimate at the end of the 14th century.[2] The Constituent Assembly was followed immediately by the war and the dictatorship of
385 the Terror. Afterwards there was nothing but a succession of usurpations. The Third Republic, born in the repugnant mass graves of May 1871, could only have a faint glimmer of legitimacy. What it had of it |*was extinguished*| disappeared.

After 1937, not only did the regime in fact deviate from legality—that would matter little, since the English government deviates from it too, and never was a British prime minister more legitimate than Winston Churchill—but the sentiment of legitimacy was gradually extinguished.

2 Weil is suggesting that the disputed succession that led to the Hundred Years War was what disrupted the continuity of the legitimacy of French royalty.

Almost no Frenchmen approved Daladier's usurpations.[3] Almost no Frenchman became indignant about them. It is the sentiment of legitimacy that makes one become indignant about usurpation.

One just took to saying in a glum tone, "What does it matter what happens? We have nothing to lose." People were not only saying it. They were thinking it. They showed it in June 1940 and during the weeks that followed.

June 1940 was not the plot of a deceitful elite. It was a failure, an abdication, by the nation as a whole.

In July the sinister farce staged in Vichy put an end to the Third Republic, without the abolition of that regime causing a shadow of regret, sorrow or anger in the hearts of the French people, outside the tiny circles of those who were professionally connected to the institutions destroyed.[4]

There was no interest in the transfer of power either. There was total indifference. Only later did the legend of Pétain take on some life.

Thus legitimacy is not a treasure that was stolen from the French nation, either by the enemy, or by a plot organised from within. The French people as a whole, from the elites to the labouring masses, opened its hand and let the treasure fall to the ground without even bothering to see where it rolled. Passers-by trampled it underfoot.

In these conditions, in what does General de Gaulle's relation to legitimacy consist?

In this. The treasure, while it lay on the ground, scorned by all, he gathered up, secured, and made it known publicly that he was making himself its caretaker until the day when its owner would be in a condition to reclaim it.

This role of custodian was contested by no one at that moment or later, except men guilty of collusion with the enemy, whose words therefore do not count. In cases like these, no objection is confirmation.

If a man takes in a child whose father is imprisoned and mother deported 386
to Germany; if he makes it known in the press that he intends to have the child live in his home until the parents come looking for him; if for several years no relative or friend of the family protests; if the child is well treated; it is right that this man should provisionally have guardianship of the child.

3 Starting in April 1938, Daladier was granted extensive powers to rule by decree.

4 Following the defeat of France and the signing of an armistice with Germany, new legislation was passed in July 1940 conferring on Marshall Pétain the power to organise the drafting of a new constitution.

It would be stupid and criminal to remove the child from him so as to place it in public care.

It was the instinctive sense of this situation that evoked in France declarations in favour of de Gaulle. These declarations acknowledge a certain kind of objective legitimacy. They do not create it. By themselves they would be powerless to create any legitimacy. The resistance movements have no standing to give France a leader. The French who came from France to London, however they were appointed, have no standing to confer an increased legitimacy on General de Gaulle.

Our movement can only come to life in and through the truth. Deceit and error are fatal to it. The truth is simple and can be formulated in a few words.

The French nation having abandoned in Summer 1940 all concern for legitimacy, General de Gaulle gathered up the legitimacy thrown on the scrapheap and made himself its custodian. He did this on his own initiative. This initiative was not contested. This uncontested initiative makes him the real custodian of French legitimacy until such time as the nation is in a position to reclaim it from him.

When will it be in a position to do so?

Not at the time of the liberation of its territory. Not even at the time when, technically speaking, one could hold elections. To accept that would be a grave, a fatal, error.

That could be accepted if it were a matter of continuing a system of government interrupted for a few years by enemy action. The matter here is completely different. The country abandoned a system that no longer inspired the least shred of attachment to it. It passed through a sort of death. It will have to conceive a new life.

The hints of sentimentality that have rather belatedly appeared with regard to a time when there was bread, butter, wine and tobacco should count for exactly nothing.

It is not just any assembly that will have to be elected. It will have to be a constitutional assembly. There has been a constitutional assembly in
387 France once; namely in 1789. One cannot count the abortion of 1848 nor the "Republic without republicans" of 1875 as constitutional bodies.

The assembly in 1789 grew so to speak like a plant in the midst of a fever of thought that shook the whole of France for months. It was teeming with circles of free discussion. The drafting of the *Cahiers de Revendication* gave them a reason for being. No party discipline, no propaganda introduced its poison.

Many people really were seeking justice and truth. It was an outpouring of true thought.

This outpouring had the [Constitutional] Assembly as its natural fruit. It retained for some months, needed for the creation of a Constitution, the inspiration from which it originated.

Who knows what would have resulted from it if the country had not thrown itself in 1792 into the criminal folly of the war? The Central Schools, so different from the lycées built by the Empire, and much superior, show what the creative genius of France was capable of then.

We will not have a Constitutional Assembly after the enemy's departure unless, several months before it is appointed, the people of France, as a whole, have begun to think. And unless those elected are the ones who came to notice in the course of a long effort of cooperation in the thinking, rather than the men who brought themselves to public notice through a demeaning public campaign.

This would not result in those elected all being intellectuals. When it comes to thinking about justice, the intelligence of a worker or a farmer is better equipped than that of a graduate of an école normale supérieure or a polytechnic or a student at Sciences Po.[5]

All that is needed is that the choice of those elected is made under the impetus of a universal effort to invent a new France, and that once elected this same effort, with which they will have been imbued, serves as their inspiration.

If instead of this the people confine themselves to choosing men from among those who seek to make their way into their favour through advertising campaigns, as was formerly the case, there will be no Constitutional Assembly. There will be an assembly; it will be able to designate as a constitution an assemblage of texts which it will have enacted; but the regime thus established will not be legitimate.

Whatever a convenient fiction may claim, sovereignty cannot be delegated.[6] If the people do not exercise theirs through their representatives—and this depends much more on the emotional ties between electors and elected than

5 This is the familiar name for the Paris Institute of Political Studies (*Institut d'études politiques de Paris*).

6 Allusion to Book II, chapter 1 of Rousseau's 1762 book *The Social Contract*, "Sovereignty Is Inalienable".

on voting procedures—they are not represented at all, and all political power is usurped.

388 France cannot be rightly regarded as capable of regaining control of its lost legitimacy until it is more or less capable of this type of constitutional election. The recent calamity is a stimulus to thought, and this capacity will consequently be at its highest point for a fairly short time after the liberation; although a certain degree of calm, balance and serenity is also required.

Two or three years seems a reasonable timeframe.

During these two years—assuming this estimate is right—it is appropriate that the custodian of the legitimacy should keep it in trust. But he will have to govern. He will be forced immediately to enact economic measures on which the destiny of the country might depend for centuries. The problem of the colonies might present itself straightaway. And for sure the life or death of a large number of Frenchmen suspected of having helped the enemy will depend entirely on his decision.

What is it that could bolster him in these responsibilities? What is it that could persuade the French people to consent to let him have them? His original initiative in which he took the legitimacy into trust will no longer be enough.

He will possess an additional degree of legitimacy if, during the period that will have preceded the liberation of the territory, the French people have increasingly obeyed him freely. Obeyed in a real way. Declarations recognising his authority are words, not obedience in deed. The fight against the Germans is not obedience to him either; it is not his authority that drives the French in this, it is the hatred that the Germans arouse. His authority can be exercised over the inspiration, the direction, and the practical arrangements of this fight. But it is only his personal authority and that of the members of the National Committee, and not at all the authority of the technical departments, that count with respect to legitimacy.

Since the material means of exercising authority in France lie entirely in the hands of the British, every time one proclaims the legitimacy of General de Gaulle in a tone that in fact causes irritation to the British, one in fact diminishes that very legitimacy one is proclaiming.

But even supposing the relations between the National Committee and France to be as satisfactory as possible, the provisional government established on the newly liberated territory will nevertheless be infinitely far from possessing a degree of legitimacy that matches the terrible responsibilities which it will not be able to avoid.

A provisional national representation would provide no remedy for this, 389
since it would not itself contain any legitimacy.

So long as the constitution of 1875 was more or less recognised by the French people as the norm of legitimacy, the elected parliament was legitimate; it was not so due to the fact that it was elected, but through its conformity with the constitution. Given that the regime of 1875 is now a corpse, all legitimacy has disappeared from the institutions it contained, including the electoral process. There is no intrinsic virtue of legitimacy in an election.

Can one seriously believe that a scrum of men hastily appointed by |*the French {illegible word}*| people half-mad from misery and hope could legitimately decide the economic and social direction of the country for a very long time to come, the structure of the empire, the life and death of a multitude of Frenchmen?

If a provisional assembly is without legitimacy; if a provisional government is itself also very much lacking in it; the two together will have less legitimacy than each separately. That may surprise an arithmetician, but it is so.

The provisional government will have to look for legitimacy elsewhere.

All the visible forms of legitimacy being lost, it can only be drawn from its source.

The concept must be thought through completely. To think about fundamental concepts as if they were something new is a necessity that is undoubtedly painful, but which today we cannot avoid on pain of catastrophe.

If he who governs has as his motive the concern for justice and for the public good, if the people have confidence that this is so and reasonable grounds for being confident that this will continue, and if the leader does not desire to retain power any longer than the people retain that confidence, then there is legitimate government.

The above, of course, sets out the ideal case.

Those political systems that define legitimacy all comprise a double mechanism. The first is intended to put the one or more who hold power in a state of allegiance to legitimacy. The other is a punitive mechanism created to inhibit by fear or to curb by punishment any deviation in relation to legitimacy. If this double mechanism functions effectively, the confidence of the people is reasonably well-founded.

390 For kings, the education, coronation, protocols, and ceremony meet the first goal. The penalty in case of dereliction is provided by the very continuity of the dynasty. A king knows that his reign will live on in the memory of the people, that the authors of chronicles will judge him, that his sons, grandsons, and those that follow, will be proud or ashamed of him, as the case may be. Posterity is for him a reality as concrete as for a classical poet.

In fact, in the monarchical system, the double mechanism functions very imperfectly. It easily becomes jammed and, once jammed, is most often impossible to repair.

In the parliamentary system, the ballot meets the first goal. Its virtue does not lie in the mere fact of the choice—which is made almost at random—but in the feeling that results from it in those elected, of having been chosen and in consequence having obligations. Likewise for the President of the Council, chosen, in essence, by the Assemblies.

The penal mechanism was provided for those elected through the limited duration of their mandate, and for the President of the Council through his answerability to the Chambers. The head of the government and the deputy who abused their positions would fear being ousted or not being re-elected, respectively.

In fact, for some time, neither of the two mechanisms was working any longer. There is no legitimacy without dignity, and the use of methods invented for commercial advertising turned the electoral campaign into a kind of prostitution. The elections seemed like a farce in which everything combined to convey an impression of illegitimacy to the electors and those elected alike. Likewise for the parliamentary horse-trading that preceded the formation of a government.

The positions of parliamentarian, minister and President of the Council were in fact professions, and the number of professionals did not much exceed the number of available positions. The interested parties made sure of this. This fact had completely blocked the penal mechanism. Any President of the Council or minister who was ousted, any incumbent not re-elected, had a strong chance of reappearing triumphantly on the political scene someday soon, even if there had been a scandal.

But even if the double mechanism of the system had worked properly, it was very inadequate. The penalty was ridiculous compared to the possible offences.

No doubt the code of penalties also has provisions for malfeasance, influ- 391
ence peddling or treason. But it has none for injustice and inhumanity.

If, for example, it had appealed to some French deputies to propose a draft of a law condemning to death all Jews irrespective of sex or age, and to other deputies to vote for it, no law would have permitted punishing them. Will it be said that their electors would then no longer have wanted them? Not even that is certain. And relative to the crime that is not much. Will it be said that such a thing has not in fact happened? But is it certain that there have not been measures put in place, albeit less visibly, of almost the same level of heinousness? For example, in the treatment of the colonies, of foreigners, of delinquent or deprived children, of the destitute, and the like.

Legitimacy is not a primary concept.[7] It derives from justice. Justice, in relation to power, requires above all a balance between power and responsibility. Responsibility can be expressed only in penal form.

Anyone holding the destiny of other human beings in his hands has the possibility of continually committing crimes; if he lets himself do so, the punishments of a criminal are fitting for him.

A destitute man who is hungry and takes a carrot from a field is punished in his flesh. If this happens often, he is sent away for life to a place in Guyana much worse than that reserved for convicts. A head of government who through cruelty, insensitivity, hate, inattention, or prejudice unjustly causes the death or the lasting misery of a human being, or of hundreds, thousands, millions of human beings, will perhaps suffer a blow to his career. He will not have to suffer anything in his flesh.

This is a monstrous inversion of justice. The injustice is not monstrous only toward the destitute. It is worse toward the leader. With such possibilities for evil, it is cruel to leave him to fight alone in the battle between good and evil inclinations. A just compassion would oblige helping the part of his soul that wants the good by subjecting the evil part to the fear of punishment.

7 Weil distinguishes between values that belong to a middle region and are of human conception and those which are from above, whose origins are divine and eternal. See "Is the human person sacred?" in this volume, manuscript pages 235–236.

The people, for their part, would live with a secure and confident sense of justice and legitimacy if, corresponding to the scale of social power, there was, level by level, an increasing scale of punishments. He who can do almost nothing either for good or for evil should have to suffer almost
392 nothing, no matter what he does, as long as he refrains from violence upon persons. He who consents to occupy a position where much can be done for good or evil should suffer much, in his honour, and in his flesh, and in his whole destiny, if he does evil.

This then is true social equilibrium. It rests entirely on the judicial system.

But if that is an appropriate principle of legitimacy, it is a thousand times more appropriate in troubled times, when dreadful responsibilities cannot be avoided and when all customary practices of legitimacy have disappeared.

Here then is the conclusion.

|*Almost no one*| Relatively few people cast doubt on the desire for legitimacy that inspires General de Gaulle. There is an air of sincerity and honour in his words that convinces. If between now and the liberation of the territory that confidence persists and grows, and if his authority is increasingly recognised by actual obedience, that will suffice, barring too many international complications, to make the act of taking power over the liberated territory simple and blameless.

In order actually to exercise power for a period of, say, two years, he has to secure additional legitimacy.

He can do so, for example, by the following series of measures.

He will have issued ahead of the victory a fundamental declaration capable of performing the function that the Declaration of 1789 was always unable to perform.[8] This declaration would be intended to inspire the practical life of the country. It would therefore conclude with an article stipulating that whoever exercises a function involving any kind of power over human destinies must solemnly pledge to take the declaration as a rule of conduct and will be punished if he deviates seriously from its spirit.

8 The function that the Declaration of 1789 was unable to perform is that of giving any force to rights. It declares they exist but fails to establish the obligation and the judicial sanctions to honour them.

This declaration would be clandestinely distributed, studied, and discussed in France ahead of the victory.

It would be submitted to a plebiscite soon after the liberation. Let us suppose the declaration were accepted, which |*is*| seems almost certain if it is good—and even, alas, if not.

General de Gaulle would take an oath to be guided exclusively by its spirit. He would announce that he is resolved to retain power on trust during the period—for example two years—needed for the country to become capable 393
of forging a destiny by itself. He would pledge to prepare for a constitutional assembly.

But all that would count for nothing. The essential point is this. He and each one of his principal staff would pledge to submit all acts by their provisional authority, without exception, to a tribunal appointed by the Constitutional Assembly drawn from outside its own ranks, for judging according to the spirit of the fundamental declaration, and empowered to pronounce any penalty whatsoever, including death.

For this pledge to have any value, General de Gaulle would have to add to it the pledge of not allowing the formation of anything in the country that could resemble an organised grouping of his supporters. Otherwise any judgment would obviously risk being a sham.

It seems clear that the exercise of provisional power, so conceived, implies the renunciation of a subsequent political career. Concern for a subsequent career would risk adulterating the complete purity indispensable to the exercise of provisional power under such terrible conditions.

It is just as much desirable that France, once stability is restored, should be led by a Frenchman who has lived through its ordeal on its own soil.

To have saved the honour of the country at the moment when it fell into slavery and to save the country itself in the dreadful crisis which will immediately follow its liberation is infinitely finer than any political career.

The implementation of the measures sketched here would seem to confer on General de Gaulle the highest degree of legitimacy that a provisional head can possess in exceptional circumstances.

The plebiscite in favour of the fundamental declaration, while not being a demonstration in favour of him personally, would be interpreted in France and abroad as a vote of confidence in his authority.

Since the local administration should immediately return to being democratic, there would be every advantage in General de Gaulle having alongside him an indirectly elected consultative assembly. This assembly should at no time have the ability to remove him from power and consequently would not have to express either confidence or no confidence. But if it works with the government effectively, then that will in fact imply mutual confidence.

394 The pledge solemnly made to account in the near future for all measures taken or omitted by the government and to stake on them his honour, his destiny, his body and his life, guarantees to the French people that General de Gaulle will bring to his task all the attention of which his mind is capable.

When one believes in the sincerity of a man—and General de Gaulle cannot assume power without crime unless, at the moment when he assumes it, nearly the whole of the French people have confidence in his sincerity—one can fear from him only failure of attention.

Human nature is such that—except for those already in the state of perfection—the inclinations to pure good are rather weak stimulants to the attention. Coarser, more mixed, motives have much more power over it. That is why the perfectly pure part of the soul must be given an external, material aid to make it constant as the sovereign mistress of attention.

The professional devotion of sea captains in the handling of their vessels has never been in doubt. Their physical bond with their ship is proverbial. One could think that these were sufficient guarantees. But the technical problems of navigation are very complex; they often demand very intense and prolonged efforts of attention in conditions of great physical discomfort. Therefore these guarantees are crowned by the penalty of death which for centuries tradition imposed in the form of self-sacrifice in the event of the loss of the ship.

In recent times this tradition has largely died out; that is perhaps due to the fact that progress in science and technology makes navigation problems much less complex.

Without needing to carry out a philosophical analysis of attention, the people sense very clearly the appropriateness of guarantees of this kind. How could they not find them appealing, when they know that in any event it is they who have to pay for their leaders' mistakes with their health, happiness, and life? The one difficulty for the suggestion made here would lie in bringing the people to the conviction that the commitment is made in good faith. Doing so is a matter of preparation, atmosphere and the right tenor.

If this succeeds, popular feeling will be affected very quickly, very 395
profoundly and very enduringly in that which is best in it. The novelty of the thing, which would be a drawback in other times, will only be advantageous. France at that moment will need a shock to be revived. And this shock must be caused by an injection of pure good.

Oeuvres complètes V:1

One of several essays Weil wrote in London in 1943, this too was inspired by her work for the Free French. Its direct concern is to argue for the legitimacy of the Free French government-in-exile rather than the Vichy government in occupied France. However, at its heart the essay is devoted to showing that political legitimacy should be grounded in the quality of citizens' engagement, rather than legal criteria.

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5

WHAT DOES THE OCCITANIAN INSPIRATION CONSIST IN[1]

414

415 Why dwell on the past, rather than turn towards the future? Nowadays, for the first time in centuries, the past is being contemplated. Is it because we are tired and close to despair? We are that; but the contemplation of the past has a better foundation.

For several centuries, we have been living on the idea of progress. Today, suffering has almost torn this idea out of our sensibility. No veil thus prevents us recognising that it was not grounded in reason. It was thought to be linked to the scientific conception of the world, even though science is contrary to it as is authentic philosophy. The latter teaches, with Plato, that the imperfect cannot produce the perfect nor the less good the better.[2] The idea of progress is the idea of a birth in stages, over the course of time, of the better from the less good. Science shows that an increase in energy can only come from an external source of energy; that a transition from low energy to high energy can only occur as the counterpart of an at least equivalent transition from high energy to low energy. Always, downward movement is the condition of upward movement. An analogous law regulates spiritual

1 Weil did not place a question mark at the end of the title of this article.
2 *Republic* 504e.

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matters. We cannot be made better, except through the influence upon us of what is better than we are.

What is better than we are cannot be found in the future. The future is empty and our imagination fills it in. The perfection that we imagine is com-
416 mensurate with us; it is exactly as imperfect as we are ourselves; it is not even by a hair's breadth better than we are. We can find it in the present, but mixed up with the mediocre and the bad; and our capacity for discrimination is imperfect like ourselves. The past offers us an already partially completed discrimination. For just as that which is eternal is alone invulnerable to time, so too the simple flowing of time effects a certain separation between what is eternal and what is not. Our attachments and our passions impede the capacity for discriminating the eternal from the darkness less heavily for the past than for the present. This is especially so for the distant dead past which does not provide any fuel to the passions.

There is nothing quite like piety toward dead homelands. No one can have the hope of reviving this land of Oc. It was, unfortunately, killed too well. This piety in no way threatens the unity of France, a fear expressed by some. Even if one admitted that it is permissible to conceal the truth when it is dangerous for one's country, which is at least doubtful, here there is no such necessity. That land, which is dead and which deserves to be mourned, was not France. But the inspiration that we can find in it does not concern the territorial divisions of Europe. It concerns our destiny as men.

Outside Europe, there are thousands-year-old traditions that offer us inexhaustible spiritual riches. But contact with these riches should lead us less to try to assimilate them as they are, except for those who specifically have the vocation for it, than to awaken us to the search for the source of spirituality that is our own; the spiritual vocation of ancient Greece is the very same as Europe's vocation, and it is this which, in the 12th century, yielded fruits and flowers in this corner of earth where we now find ourselves.[3]

Each country in pre-Roman antiquity had its vocation and its revelation oriented not exclusively, but primarily, towards one aspect of supernatural truth. For Israel this was the oneness of God, obsessing them to the point of being an idée fixe. We can no longer know what it was for Mesopotamia. For Persia, it was the opposition and struggle between good and evil. For India,

3 Weil was living in Marseilles where the journal *Cahiers du Sud* that published Weil's article was located. Marseilles was at some points in history within the Occitanian cultural region.

the identification, with the help of mystical union, of God with the soul arrived at the state of perfection. For China, the activity inherent to God, the divine non-action which is the plenitude of action, the divine absence which is the plenitude of presence. For Egypt, it was charity towards one's 417
neighbour, expressed with a purity that has never been surpassed; it was above all the immortal bliss of souls saved after a just life, and salvation by becoming alike to a God who had lived, had suffered, had died a violent death, and had become in the other world the judge and saviour of souls. Greece received the message from Egypt, and also had its own revelation: this was the revelation of human misery, the transcendence of God, the infinite distance between God and man.

Haunted by this distance, Greece worked only on building bridges. Its whole civilisation is made of them. Its mystery religions, its philosophy, its marvellous art, that science which is its own invention and all of its branches, all these were bridges between God and man. Except the first, we have inherited all these bridges. We have raised the structure of the bridges much higher. But we now believe that they are made to be inhabited. We do not know that they are there for to be crossed; we have no idea whom one would find on the other side if they were crossed.

The best among the Greeks were gripped by the idea of mediation between God and man, of mediation in the descending movement by which God goes in search of man. It is this idea that was expressed in their notion of harmony and proportion, which is at the centre of all their thought, all their art, all their science, and their whole conception of life. By the time Rome took to brandishing its sword, Greece had only begun to fulfil its vocation as bridge-builder.

Rome destroyed every vestige of spiritual life in Greece, as in all the countries that it subdued and reduced to the condition of provinces. All bar one. Unlike the revelations of the other countries, Israel's revelation had been essentially collective, and hence much more crude, but also much more robust; it alone could resist the pressure of the Roman terror. Protected by this shell, there smouldered a bit of Greek spirit that had survived on the east coast of the Mediterranean. So, after three arid centuries, amidst the burning thirst of so many peoples, there gushed forth a perfectly pure spring. The idea of mediation received the fullness of reality, the perfect bridge appeared, and, as Plato had hoped, divine Wisdom became visible to the eyes.[4] The Greek vocation thus found its perfection by becoming the Christian vocation.

4 Allusion to *Phaedrus* 250b.

This lineage, and in consequence also the authentic mission of Christianity, was long prevented from becoming evident. Initially due to the fact of
418 having been in the midst of Israel and due to the belief in the imminent end of the world, a belief as a matter of fact indispensable to the dissemination of the message. Even more so later on due to its status as the official religion of the Roman empire. The Beast was baptised, but its baptism was tainted. Fortunately, the Barbarians came to destroy the Beast and bring new and fresh blood with traditions from afar. At the end of the 10th century, stability and security were restored, and Byzantine and Oriental influences circulated freely. Then came the Romanesque civilisation. The churches, the sculptures, the Gregorian chant of this time, and the few frescoes remaining to us from the 10th and 11th centuries are alone in being almost equal to Greek art in majesty and purity. This was the true Renaissance. The Greek spirit was reborn in the Christian form which is its truth.

A few centuries later the other Renaissance took place, the false one, the one that we today call by this name. It had a point of equilibrium where the unity of the two spirits was foreseen. But very quickly it produced humanism, which consists in taking the bridges that Greece bequeathed to us as permanent habitations. It was thought possible to turn away from Christianity in order to turn toward the Greek spirit, even though they are in the very same place. Since then the role of the spiritual in the life of Europe has only been diminishing to almost nothing. Today the sting of calamity makes us view with disgust the progression whose endpoint is the current situation. We revile and want to reject this humanism that the Renaissance, the 18th century and the Revolution elaborated. But by doing so, far from elevating ourselves, we abandon the last, pale and confused image we had of the supernatural vocation of man.

Our present distress is rooted in this false Renaissance. What happened between the true and the false Renaissance?

Many crimes and errors. The decisive crime was perhaps the murder of that Occitanian country on whose soil we are living. We know that it was in many ways the centre of Romanesque civilisation. The moment when it perished is also the moment when Romanesque civilisation came to an end.

Even so there was still a living link with the thousands-years-old traditions that we are today once again trying with difficulty to recover, those of India, Persia, Egypt, Greece, and others perhaps as well. The 13th century cut this link. There was previously an openness to all outside spiritual currents. As deplorable as the Crusades were, at least they really were accompanied by an

exchange of mutual influences between the combatants, an exchange where the contribution of the Arabs was in fact greater than that of Christendom. 419
They were in this way infinitely superior to our modern colonial wars. From the 13th century onward Europe withdrew into itself and soon no longer left the territory of the continent except to destroy. Still, the seeds were there for what today we call our civilisation. These seeds remained buried until the Renaissance. And all of this, the past, the outside world, and the future, was completely enveloped within the supernatural light of Christianity. The supernatural did not interfere with the secular, did not crush it, and did not seek to eliminate it. It left it intact and in so doing remained pure. In that was its origin and its destination.

The gothic Middle Ages, which appeared after the destruction of the Occitanian homeland, were an essay in spiritual totalitarianism. The secular as such had no place. This want of proportion is neither beautiful nor just; a spiritual totalitarianism is by the same token degraded. That is not where the Christian civilisation lies. The Christian civilisation is the Romanesque civilisation, prematurely extinguished after an assassination.[5] It is infinitely grievous to think that the weapons of that murder were wielded by the Church. But what is grievous is sometimes true. It may be that at this start to the 13th century Christendom had a choice to make. It chose badly. It chose evil. This evil has borne fruit, and we are sunk in evil. Repentance is going back to the moment that preceded the bad choice.

The essence of the Occitanian inspiration is identical to that of the Greek inspiration. It is constituted by the understanding of force. This understanding belongs only to supernatural courage. Supernatural courage contains all that we call courage and, in addition, something infinitely more precious. But cowards take supernatural courage for weakness of soul. To understand force is, while recognising it as all but absolutely sovereign in this world, to refuse it with disgust and contempt. This contempt is the other side of the compassion for everything that is exposed to the blows of force.

This refusal of force is at its most complete in the idea of love. The courtly love of the land of Oc is the same thing as Greek love, although the rather different role played by the woman conceals this identity. But contempt for the woman was not what led the Greeks to honour love between men, today

5 A Vatican emissary was assassinated in 1208, an event which indirectly led to a crusade against the Cathars initiated by the Vatican in 1209.

something base and vile. They honoured love between women in the same way, as is seen in Plato's *Symposium* and in the example of Sappho. What they
420 were thus honouring was nothing other than impossible love. Consequently, it was nothing other than chastity. Due to the overly loose morals, there was almost no obstacle to pleasure in the sexual relations between men and women, whereas shame prevented every rightly-oriented soul from entertaining a pleasure that the Greeks themselves called against nature. When Christianity and the high purity of morals imported by the Germanic tribes placed between man and woman the barrier that was missing in Greece, they became for each other the objects of Platonic love. The sacred bond of marriage assumed the place of the sameness of sex. The authentic troubadours had no more taste for adultery than Sappho and Socrates had for vice; what they needed was impossible love. Today we can only think of Platonic love under the form of courtly love, but it is indeed the same love.

The essence of this love is expressed in a few marvellous lines from the *Symposium*:

> The main thing is that Love neither does nor undergoes any injustice, neither among the gods nor among men. For it does not suffer by force, whatever it has to suffer, since force does not touch Love. And when it acts, it does not act by force; since everyone willingly obeys Love in everything. An agreement consented to on both sides is just, say the laws of the royal city.[6]

All that is subject to the contact of force is debased, whatever the contact. To strike or to be struck, it is one and the same defilement. The cold of steel is equally fatal at the handle and at the point. All that is exposed to the contact of force is susceptible to degradation. All things in this world are exposed to the contact of force, with no exception, other than love. This is not natural love, like that of Phaedra and of Arnolphe, which is slavery and leads to compulsion. It is supernatural love, the love which in its truth goes straight to God, which comes straight back down from him united with the love that God brings to his creation, which directly or indirectly turns always toward the divine.

Courtly love had a human being as its object; but it is not a covetousness. It is merely a waiting directed towards the beloved which is appealing to

6 Plato, *Symposium* 196b-c.

them for consent. The word *merci*[7] by which the troubadours designated this consent is very close to the notion of grace. Such a love in its plenitude is 421
love of God through the beloved. In that land as in Greece, human love was one of the bridges between man and God.

The same inspiration shines brightly in Romanesque art. Its architecture, despite having borrowed a form from Rome, has no concern for power or might, but solely for balance; whereas there is some defilement by might and pride in the thrust of gothic spires and the height of pointed vaults. The Romanesque church is suspended like a scales around its point of equilibrium, a point of equilibrium that rests only on emptiness which can be sensed without anything marking its location. This is what is needed to outline that cross which became a scales upon which the body of Christ became the counterweight to the universe. The sculpted beings are never characters; they never seem to be performing; they do not know that they are being seen. They hold themselves in a manner dictated only by sentiment and architectural proportion. Their awkwardness is a nakedness. Gregorian chant rises slowly, and at the moment when one thinks it will gain confidence, the rising movement is halted and abates; rising movement is continually subject to descending movement. Grace is the source of all this art.

Occitanian poetry, in some of its faultless achievements, has a purity comparable to that of Greek poetry. Greek poetry expressed sorrow with a purity such that in the depths of unalloyed bitterness there shone brightly perfect serenity. Some verses of the troubadours knew how to express joy in a manner so pure that heartbreaking pain, the inconsolable sorrow of the finite creature, showed through it.

> *When I see the lark moving*
> *Out of joy her wings against the sunbeam,*
> *As she loses herself and lets herself fall*
> *From the sweetness which goes to her heart . . .*[8]

7 Here 'merci' is not the familiar French word for "thank you" but an untranslated Occitanian word connected with love between a woman and a man.

8 Weil here makes use of a French translation of the original Occitanian *canso* (musical poem) by Bernart de Ventadorn, active in the second half of 12th century. The poem's title is its first line, "Can vei la lauzeta mover" about a lark (*lauzeta*). It is listed as PC 70.43 in *Bibliographie des Troubadours* by Alfred Pillet and Henry Carstens.

After this land had been destroyed, English poetry took up the same note, and nothing in the modern languages of Europe has delights comparable to those it contains.

The Pythagoreans said that harmony or proportion is the unity of opposites qua opposites. There is no harmony where violence is done to opposites to bring them together; nor where they are mixed together; their point of unity must be found. Never to do violence to one's own soul; never to seek
422 either consolation or torment; to contemplate the thing, whatever it might be, that arouses an emotion, until the secret point is reached where sorrow and joy, by dint of being pure, are one and the same; that is the true virtue of poetry.

In that land public life also proceeded from the same spirit. [It loved liberty.][9] It did not love obedience any less. The unity of these two opposites is Pythagorean harmony in society. But there can only be harmony between things that are pure.

Purity in public life is the elimination, pushed as far as possible, of all that is force, that is to say of all that is collective, all that has its source in the social Beast, as Plato called it.[10] The social Beast alone has force. It exercises it as a mass of people or lodges it in several men or one man. But the law as such has no force; it is only a written text, yet it is the sole bulwark of liberty. The civic spirit conforming to this Greek ideal, for which Socrates was a martyr, is perfectly pure. A man, whoever he may be, considered simply as a man, is also totally devoid of force. If one obeys him in that capacity, the obedience is perfectly pure. That is the meaning of personal loyalty within relationships of subordination; it leaves pride wholly intact. But when one carries out the orders of a man in his capacity as a custodian of a collective power, whether with love or without, one demeans oneself. Even Théophile de Viau, a great poet and in many respects an authentic inheritor of the Occitanian tradition, still understood it as devotion to a king or master. But when Richlieu, in his work of unification, killed in France all that was not Paris, this spirit disappeared completely. Louis XIV imposed upon his subjects a submission which did not deserve the beautiful name of obedience.

9 This sentence does not appear in Weil's manuscript. It was added by the editors of *Cahiers du Sud*, who published the article. It is consolidated into Weil's text by the editors of the *Oeuvres complètes*.

10 Allusion to *Republic* 493.

In Toulouse at the start of the 13th century social life was no doubt tainted, as it is everywhere and always. But at least its inspiration, composed solely of civic spirit and obedience, was pure. In those who attacked it victoriously, the inspiration itself was tainted.

We cannot know if there would have been a Romanesque science. Had there been it would probably have been to ours as Gregorian chant is to Wagner. The Greeks, amongst whom that which we call our science was born, looked upon it as issuing from a divine revelation and as destined to lead the 423
soul towards the contemplation of God. It strayed from this destination, not through excess, but through a deficit of scientific spirit, exactitude and rigour. Science is an exploration of all that appears from the order of the world at the scale of our psycho-physical organism. Only at this scale, for neither telescopes, nor microscopes, nor the most dizzying mathematical notation, nor any procedure of any kind allows us to step out of it. Science does not therefore have any other object than the action of the Word, or, as the Greeks put it, of the ordering Love. Science alone, and only in its purest rigour, can give a precise content to the notion of Providence, and within the domain of knowledge it can do nothing else. Like art it has beauty as its object. Romanesque beauty might also have shone brightly in science.

The need for purity in the Occitanian lands found its extreme expression in the Cathar religion, the occasion of its demise. Since the Cathars seem to have practiced spiritual freedom all the way to the absence of dogmas, which is not without drawbacks, it was without any doubt necessary that away from their lands the Christian dogma should be preserved by the Church, as an integral whole, like a diamond, with an incorruptible diligence. But with a bit more faith, one would not have thought that for this their complete extermination was necessary.

They pushed their horror of force all the way to the practice of non-violence and to the doctrine according to which everything that is in the domain of force proceeds from evil, which is to say everything carnal and everything social. That was going far, but no further than the Gospels. For there are two discussions in the Gospels that go as far as it is possible to go. One concerns the eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The other is the one in which the Devil addresses Christ when showing him the kingdoms of the earth:

> I will give you all this power and the glory attached to it, for it was ceded to me, to me and to whomever it pleases me to share in it.[11]

The spirit of that age has reappeared and has grown from the Renaissance to the present day, but missing the supernatural; deprived of the light that nourishes, it has grown as a plant can do without chlorophyl. Today this
424 disorder that the *Bhagavad-gītā* called the distortion of opposites drives us to seek the opposite of humanism. Some seek this opposite in the adoration of force, of the collective, of the social Beast; others in a return to the gothic Middle Ages. The first is possible and even easy, but it is evil; the second is not desirable either, and is moreover entirely chimerical, since we cannot unmake our having been raised in an environment constituted almost exclusively of secular values. Salvation would lie in going to the pure place where opposites are one.

If the 18th century had read Plato, it would not have called the enlightenment[12] of acquired knowledge and of the faculties simply natural. The image of the cave makes it obvious that man has darkness as his natural condition, that he is born in it, that he lives in it and that he dies in it if he does not turn towards a light that descends from a place located on the other side of the sky. Humanism was not wrong in thinking that truth, beauty, liberty, and equality are of infinite value, but in believing that man can secure them without grace.

The movement that destroyed the Romanesque civilisation subsequently brought humanism as a reaction. Now arrived at the end of this second movement, are we going to continue this monotonous oscillation in which each time we descend much lower? Are we not going to turn our eyes towards the point of equilibrium? Going back over the course of history we do not find the point of equilibrium until the 12th century.

We do not have to wonder how to apply the inspiration of a time so remote to our current living conditions. To whatever extent we contemplate the beauty of this age with attention and love, to that extent its inspiration

11 Lk 4:6.

12 Weil is using the word *lumières* (lights) in a manner that suggests both the period of the Enlightenment—which *les Lumières* designates—and the enlightenment achieved through the intellect.

will descend upon us and will little by little make impossible at least a part of the baseness that constitutes the air we are breathing.

ÉMILE NOVIS

Oeuvres complètes IV:2

Written in Marseilles in February 1942 and published in the Marseilles journal *Cahiers du Sud* in 1943, this article is dedicated to the Occitanian culture during the 11th to 13th centuries. Centred on Albi, near Toulouse, but encompassing more than the present day Languedoc, it was the centre of Catharism—an unorthodox Christianity ultimately destroyed by the Catholic Church. This culture exemplified the spiritually inspired way of life Weil advocated as a balm for contemporary decay.

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6

PRELUDE TO A DECLARATION OF DUTIES TOWARD THE HUMAN BEING

[Extract][1]

The concept of obligation takes precedence over that of rights, which is 111
subordinate and relative to it. A right is not efficacious on its own, but only through the obligation to which it corresponds; |*and the*| |*the expression of a*| the effective fulfilment of a right comes not from the one who possesses it, but from other men who recognise themselves as obliged to do something toward him. Obligation is efficacious once it is recognised. An obligation, were it not recognised by anyone, loses nothing from the fullness of its being. A right that is not recognised by anyone does not count for much.

It makes no sense to say that men have rights on the one hand, duties on the other. These words express only differences in point of view. Their relation is that of object and subject. A man, considered on his own, has only duties, among these are certain duties toward himself. Others, considered from his point of view, have only rights. He in turn has rights when he is considered from the point of view of others, who |*recognise them in him*|

1 This extract comprises all of the first 34 manuscript pages.

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recognise obligations toward him. A man who was alone in the universe would have no rights, but he would have obligations.

The concept of rights, being objective in nature, is not separable from the concepts of existence and of reality. It appears when obligation moves down to the domain of facts; it thus always contains to some extent consideration of matters of fact and of particular situations. Rights always appear linked to cer-
112 tain conditions. Obligation alone can be unconditional. Its place is in a domain that is beyond all conditions, because the domain is beyond this world.

The men of 1789 did not recognise the reality of such a domain. They only recognised the domain of human affairs. That is why they started with the concept of rights. But at the same time they sought to postulate absolute principles. This contradiction made them fall into a confusion of language and ideas which has much to do with the present political and social confusion. The domain of what is eternal, universal, and unconditional is different from the domain of factual conditions and is home to different concepts, which are linked to the innermost part of the human soul.

Obligation binds only human beings. There are no obligations for collectivities as such. But there are obligations for all the human beings who make up, serve, command or represent a collectivity in the part of their life bound to the collectivity as in that part which is independent of it.

Identical obligations bind all human beings, although they are matched by different acts depending on the situation. No human being, whoever he might be, under no circumstances, can avoid these without crime; except in the case where two real obligations are in fact incompatible and a man is compelled to abandon one of them.

The imperfection of a social order is measured by the number of situations of this kind that it encompasses.

But even in that case there is a crime if the obligation abandoned is not only abandoned in fact, but is on top of that denied.

| All human beings, within all personal or collective relations, are bound by a specific obligation toward every human being, and this due to the fact that he is a human being, without any other condition having to intervene. | [2]

2 In the presentation of this text in the *Oeuvres complètes*, this paragraph and the next appear in reverse order, giving the impression that Simone Weil wrote the paragraph she kept before writing another version and crossing it out. Instead, as the editors note, Weil crossed out this paragraph and stapled the one that follows onto the manuscript page. It is presented here in this order to suggest the order of composition, viz. drafting one paragraph, crossing it out, writing a replacement and stapling it to the manuscript.

The object of obligation, in the domain of human affairs, is always the human being as such. There is an obligation toward every human being, from the mere fact that he is a human being, without any other condition having to intervene, and that even if he would not recognise any of them.

This obligation does not rest on any matter of fact, nor on case law, nor on customs, nor on social structure, nor on power relations, nor on the legacy 113
of the past, nor on the supposed direction of history. For no matter of fact can give rise to an obligation.

This obligation does not rest on any covenant. For all covenants are modifiable according to the will of the contracting parties, whereas here no change in the will of men can modify anything at all |*in that obligation*|.

This obligation is eternal. It responds to the eternal destiny of the human being. Only the human being has an eternal destiny. Human collectivities do not have one. Also, there are no direct obligations toward them that could be eternal. What is alone eternal is the duty toward the human being as such.

This obligation is unconditional. If it is founded on something, this something does not belong to our world. In our world, it is not founded on anything. This is the sole obligation |*here below*| relating to human affairs that is not subject to any condition.

This obligation has no foundation, but rather a verification in the agreement of universal conscience. It is expressed in some of the oldest written texts that have come down to us. It is recognised by everyone in every single case where it is not fought by interests or passions. It is in relation to it that progress is measured.

|*This obligation*|

The recognition of this obligation is expressed in a confused and imperfect way, though how imperfect depends on the case, by what we call positive rights. To the extent to which positive rights are in contradiction with it, to that very extent they are tainted by illegitimacy.

Although this eternal obligation responds to the eternal destiny of the human being, it does not have this destiny as its direct object. The eternal destiny of a human being cannot be the object of any obligation, because it is not |*subject to*| contingent upon external actions.

The fact that a human being possesses an eternal destiny imposes only a single obligation; that is respect. The obligation is not |*expressed*| fulfilled unless respect is actually expressed, in a way that is real and not a fictitious; 114
this can only be done through the intermediary of man's earthly needs.

Human conscience has never varied on this point. Thousands of years ago, the Egyptians thought that a soul could not be vindicated after death if it could not say, "I did not let anyone suffer from hunger."[3] All Christians know they are liable to hear Christ himself say to them one day, "I was hungry, and you did not give me to eat."[4] Everyone imagines progress as being initially a movement toward a state of human society where people will not suffer hunger. If one poses the question in general terms to anyone at all, no one would think that a man is innocent if, having food in abundance and finding on his doorstep someone three quarters dead from hunger, he goes past him without giving him anything.[5]

It is therefore an eternal obligation toward a human being not to let him suffer from hunger when one has the opportunity to help him. This obligation being the most evident, it should serve as a model for drawing up a list of the eternal duties toward every human being. To be established with complete rigour, the list should proceed from this first example by way of analogy.

In consequence, the list of obligations toward the human being should correspond to |*certain*| |*a list of the*| the list of those human needs which are vital, essential, and analogous to hunger.

Among these needs, some are physical, like hunger itself. They are quite easy to enumerate. They concern |*security*| protection against violence, housing, clothing, warmth, hygiene, or care in case of illness.

Others among these needs do not have a connection with physical life, but with mental life. Like the former, however, they are earthly, and have no direct relation with the eternal destiny of man that would be accessible to our intelligence. They are, like physical needs, necessities for life here below. This
115 means that if they are not satisfied, man falls little by little into a state more or less analogous to death, more or less akin to a purely vegetative life.

They are much more difficult to recognise and enumerate than the needs of the body. But everyone recognises that they exist. All the |*kinds of*| cruelties that a conqueror can visit upon subjugated populations, massacres, maiming, organised famines, enslavement or mass deportations, are generally

3 This is an extract from the "Declaration of Innocence" of the negative confession in section 125 of the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*.

4 Mt 25:42, this is what those who did not give anything to Christ come to hear.

5 The French word 'nourriture' is translated as food and sometimes as nourishment. See "Notes on the translation".

considered the same kinds of measures, even though liberty or native country are not |*physical needs*| physical necessities. Everyone is well aware that there are cruelties that are injurious to the life of a man without being injurious to his body. These are the ones that deprive the man of a kind of nourishment necessary for the life of the soul.

Obligations, whether unconditional or relative, eternal or changeable, direct or indirect, in relation to human affairs all derive, without exception, from the vital needs of the human being. Those that do not directly concern this, that or some other specific human being all have as their object things that have with respect to men a role analogous to food.

One owes respect to a field of wheat, not for itself, but because it is food for men.

In an analogous way, one owes respect to a collectivity, whatever it may be—country, family, or any other—not for itself, but as nourishment for a certain number of human souls.

This obligation does in fact dictate different attitudes and actions depending on different situations. But considered in itself, it is absolutely identical for all.

Notably, it is absolutely identical for those who are inside a particular collective and for those who are outside.

The degree of respect which is owed to human collectivities is very high, for several reasons.

To begin with, each is unique and, if destroyed, cannot be replaced. One sack of wheat can always be substituted for another sack of wheat. The nourishment that a collectivity provides to the souls of those who are its members has no equivalent in the whole universe.

Next, due to its continuity, the collectivity is already entering the future. It 116
contains nourishment not only for the souls of the living, but also for those beings not yet born who will come into the world in the course of the following centuries.

Lastly, due to this same continuity, the collectivity has its roots in the past. It constitutes the sole medium for the preservation of the spiritual treasures amassed by the dead, the sole medium of transmission by means of which the dead are able to speak to the living. And the sole earthly thing which has a direct link with man's eternal destiny is the radiance of those who have known how to reach a complete awareness of this destiny, transmitted from generation to generation.

On account of all this, it can sometimes happen that the obligation in regard to a collectivity in peril may go to the point of total sacrifice. But it does not follow that the collectivity is above the human being. It sometimes also happens that the obligation to rescue a human being in distress must go to the point of total sacrifice, without this implying any superiority on the side of the one who is rescued.

In certain circumstances, a farmer may have to risk exhaustion, illness or even death to cultivate his field. But he always has in mind that it is just a matter of bread.

In an analogous way, even at the moment of total sacrifice, no collectivity is ever owed anything other than a respect analogous to that which is owed to food.

It happens very often that the roles are reversed. Some collectivities, instead of serving as food, are on the contrary eating souls. There is in this case a social disease and the first obligation is to attempt to treat it; in certain circumstances it may be necessary to take inspiration from surgical methods.

On this point too, the obligation is identical for those who are inside the collective and for those who are outside.

It also happens sometimes that a collectivity does not provide the souls of its members with adequate nourishment. In that case it must be fortified.

Finally there are dead collectivities which, while not devouring souls, do not nourish them either. If it is completely certain that they are really dead, that it is not a matter of a temporary lethargy, then, but only then, they must be annihilated.

The first study to be done is of the needs which are for the life |*of the body*|
117 of the soul what the needs for food, sleep, and warmth are for the life of the body. One must try to enumerate and to define them.

One must never confuse them with desires, whims, fantasies, or vices. One must also distinguish the essential and the incidental. Man needs, not rice or potatoes, but food; not wood or coal, but heat. Likewise, for the needs of the soul one must recognise the different, but equivalent, satisfactions matching the same needs. One must distinguish nourishments for the soul from the poisons which can for a time create the illusion of taking their place.

The absence of such a study forces governments, when they have good intentions, to act haphazardly.

Here are some pointers.

I. The first need of the soul, the one that is closest to its eternal destiny, is |*an order*| order, that is to say a fabric of social relations such that no one shall be

forced to violate stringent obligations so as to fulfil other obligations. The soul suffers a spiritual violence from external circumstances only in this case. For the one who is being stopped from fulfilling an obligation only by the threat of death or suffering can disregard it and will not be injured except in his body. But one for whom the circumstances make the actions required by several strict obligations actually incompatible, this one, without his being able to protect himself against it, is injured in his love for the good.

Today, there is a very high degree of disorder and incompatibility between obligations.

Whoever acts in such a way as to increase this incompatibility is a fomenter of disorder. Whoever acts in such a way as to diminish it is an agent of order. Whoever, so as to simplify problems, denies certain obligations, has in his heart formed an alliance with crime.

Unfortunately there is no method for diminishing this incompatibility. There is not even the certainty that the idea of an order in which all obligations are compatible is not a fiction. When duty moves down to the level of facts, such a large number of independent relations come into play that incompatibility seems far more probable than compatibility.

Yet we have all the time before our eyes the example of the universe, where 118
an infinity of independent mechanical actions concur to constitute an order which, throughout its fluctuations, remains fixed. Equally, we love the beauty of the world because we feel behind it the presence of something analogous to the wisdom that we would like to possess in order to satisfy our desire for good.

To a lesser degree, truly beautiful works of art offer the example of ensembles where independent factors concur, in a way impossible to comprehend, to constitute a unique beauty.

Finally, sensitivity about varying obligations issues always from a desire for the good which is in every man, from the cradle to the grave, single, constant, and unchanging. This desire, acting perpetually deep within us, prevents our ever being able to resign ourselves to situations where obligations are incompatible. We either resort to lying to forget that they exist or we struggle blindly to get out of them.

The contemplation of genuine works of art |*of the first rank*|, and even more so of the beauty of the world, and still more so of the unknown good to which we aspire, can sustain us in the effort to think continually about the human order which must be our primary objective.

The great fomenters of violence were themselves encouraged by considering how blind, mechanical force is sovereign throughout the universe.

By looking at the universe better than they do, we shall find greater encouragement if we consider how |*the multi*[*tude*]| the innumerable blind forces are limited, combined in an equilibrium, drawn to work together in a unity, by something that we do not understand, but that we love and that we call beauty.

If we keep in mind constantly the thought of a veritable human order, if we think of it as an objective to which one owes total sacrifice should the occasion for it arise, we will be in the situation of a man who is walking at night, with no guide, but thinking constantly about the direction he wants to follow. There is great hope for such a traveller.

This order is first among needs, it is even above needs properly speaking. To be able to think about it, knowledge of other needs is necessary.

119 The first characteristic that distinguishes needs from desires, fantasies or vices, and nourishment from delicacies or poisons, is that needs are limited, just like the nourishments corresponding to them. A miser never has enough gold, but for any man, if you give him as much bread as he wants, there will come a point where he will have had enough. Food brings satiation. It is the same with the nourishments of the soul.

The second characteristic, connected to the first, is that needs are ordered in pairs of contraries, and must be combined in an equilibrium. Man needs food, but also an interval between meals; he needs warmth and coolness, rest and exercise. The same for needs of the soul.

What is called the golden mean consists in reality in satisfying neither one nor the other of the contrary needs. It is the caricature of a real equilibrium wherein the contrary needs are both satisfied each in its fullness.

II. An indispensable nourishment for the human soul is freedom. Freedom, in the concrete sense of the word, consists in the possibility of choice. Of course, it is a matter of a real possibility. Wherever there is communal life, it is inevitable that the rules, required by the common good, limit choice.

Yet freedom is not greater or lesser according to whether the limits are narrower or broader. It reaches its fullness under conditions less easily measured.

Rules must be sufficiently reasonable and sufficiently simple so that anyone who so desires and has an average capacity for attention can understand, on the one hand the benefit to which they relate, and on the other the factual necessities that required them. They must emanate from an authority which is not viewed as alien or hostile, which is loved as belonging to those it

directs. They must be sufficiently stable, sufficiently few in number, and sufficiently general so that the mind can internalise them once and for all, and 120
not have to confront them every time there is a |*resolution*| decision to take.

In these conditions, the freedom of men of goodwill, though limited by the facts, is total in conscience. For the rules having been incorporated into their own being, the prohibited possibilities do not present themselves to their thought and do not have to be rejected. Likewise the habit, imparted by education, of not eating repulsive or dangerous things is not felt by a normal man as a limit on his freedom in the area of diet. Only a child feels the limit.

Those who lack goodwill or remain childish are never free in any state of society.

When the possibilities for choice are broad to the point of harming the common good, men get no enjoyment from freedom. For they must either resort to the refuge of irresponsibility, childishness, or indifference, a refuge where they can only find boredom, or feel overwhelmed with responsibility in every circumstance by the fear of harming others. In such cases men, wrongly believing that they have freedom and feeling that they do not enjoy it, come to think that freedom is not a good.

III. Obedience is a vital need of the human soul. It is of two kinds; obedience to established rules and obedience to human beings regarded as leaders. It presupposes consent, not in regard to each order received, but a consent given once and for all, subject only, if need be, to the requirements of conscience. It is necessary that it be generally recognised, and most of all by leaders, that consent and not the fear of punishment or the hope of reward in fact constitutes the principal spring of obedience, so that submission is never taken for servility. It must also be known that those who command obey in their turn; and the whole hierarchy must be oriented towards a goal whose value and even grandeur is felt by all, from the highest to the lowest.

Obedience being a nourishment necessary to the soul, whoever is altogether deprived of it is sick. Therefore every collectivity ruled by a sovereign leader who is not accountable to anyone lies in the hands of a sick man.

This is why, wherever a man is placed for life at the head of the social structure, he must be a symbol and not a leader, as is the case for the King 121
of England; also propriety must limit his freedom more narrowly than any commoner's. In this way, the actual leaders, though still leaders, have someone above them; on the other hand, they can be replaced, without the

continuity being interrupted, and in consequence each one can receive his indispensable measure of obedience.

Those who subjugate masses of humanity by coercion and cruelty deprive them at once of two vital nourishments, freedom and obedience; for these masses are no longer able to give their internal consent to the authority to which they are subjected. Those who promote a state of affairs where the lure of gain is the principal motive take obedience away from men, for the consent which is the premise of obedience is not something that can be sold.

A thousand signs show that men of our age have for a long time been hungry for obedience. But this was exploited to give them slavery.

IV. Initiative and responsibility |*are needs of the human soul*|, the feeling of being useful even indispensable, are vital needs of the human soul.

Complete deprivation in this regard is the case for the unemployed, even when he is helped so that he can eat, clothe and house himself. He is nothing in economic life, and the ballot paper which constitutes his part in political life has no meaning for him.

The unskilled labourer is hardly in a better situation.

The satisfaction of this need requires that a man should often have to take decisions about matters, big or small, affecting interests other than his own, but in which he feels involved. He also has to put in a continuous effort. Lastly, he has to be able to embrace in his thinking the whole work of the collectivity of which he is a member, including areas where he never has a decision to take or advice to give. For this, he has to be made familiar with it, has to be asked to take an interest in it, has to be made aware of its value, its usefulness, and its grandeur if applicable, and has to be made to grasp clearly the part he plays in it.

122 Every collectivity, no matter what kind, that does not provide the satisfaction of these needs for its members, is defective and must be transformed.

In any personality at all strong, the need for initiative goes all the way to the need for being in charge. A vibrant local and regional life, a multitude of educational activities and youth movements should give anyone not incapable of it the opportunity to be in charge during certain periods of his life.

V. Equality is a vital need of the human soul. It consists in the public, general, and effective recognition, genuinely reflected in institutions and mores, that the same amount of respect and consideration is due to every human being, because respect is due to the human being as such and is not a matter of degree.

Consequently, the inevitable differences among men must never signify a difference in the degree of respect. In order that these differences might not be felt as having that significance, there must be a certain balance between equality and inequality.

A certain combination of equality and inequality is created by the equality of opportunities. If no matter who can reach the social rank commensurate with the function he is capable of performing, and if education is widespread enough so that none is deprived of any capability by the sole fact of his birth, then the prospects for all children are the same. In this way every man is equal in his prospects to every other, both on his own account when he is young, and on his children's account later on.

But this combination when it operates on its own, rather than as one factor among many, does not create an equilibrium and contains great dangers.

First of all, for a man who is in an inferior situation and suffers from it, to know that his situation is caused by his inability and to know that everyone knows it is not a consolation but a redoubling of bitterness; depending on their characters, some can be overcome by it, others led to crime.

Next, an upward suction pump, as it were, is thereby inevitably created within social life. This results in a social malady unless there is a downward movement that produces an equilibrium with the upward movement. To the 123
extent to which it is actually possible for a child, the son of a farmhand, to one day be a cabinet minister, to that extent it should actually be possible for a child, the son of a cabinet minister, to one day be a farmhand. The extent of this second possibility could not be substantial without a very dangerous level of social coercion.

This kind of equality, if it operates alone and without limits, gives social life a degree of fluidity that disintegrates it.

There are less crude methods for combining equality and difference. The first is proportion. Proportion is defined as the combination of equality and inequality, and everywhere in the universe it is the sole factor in equilibrium.

Applied to social equilibrium, it would impose on each man liabilities corresponding to his power and to the comforts he possesses, and corresponding risks in the event of incompetence or misconduct. For example a boss incompetent or guilty of misconduct toward his workers should suffer much more, in his soul and in his flesh, than an unskilled worker incompetent or guilty of misconduct toward his boss. What is more, all the unskilled workers should know that this is so. This entails, for one thing,

a certain categorisation of risks, and for another, a conception of punishment in the penal code in which social rank always plays, like aggravating circumstances, a large part in determining the penalty. With even more reason, holding high public offices should carry serious personal risks.

Another way of making equality compatible with difference is to remove as much as one can every quantitative quality from difference. Where there is only difference in kind, not in degree, there is no inequality.

In making money almost the sole motive of all actions, almost the sole measure of all things, one has |*aggra*[*vated*]| |*put inequality*| introduced the
124 poison of inequality everywhere. It is true that this inequality is mobile; it is not attached to people, for money is won and lost; but it is no less real for that.

There are two kinds of inequalities, each with a different, corresponding incentives. The more or less stable inequality, like that of old France, engenders the idolatry of superiors—not without an admixture of repressed hatred—and submission to their orders. The shifting and fluid inequality engenders the desire to move up in the world. It is no closer to equality than stable inequality, and is just as unhealthy. The Revolution of 1789, in emphasising equality, did no more in reality than consecrate the substitution of one form of inequality for another.

The more equality there is in a society, the less is the effect of the two incentives tied to the two forms of inequality, and hence other incentives are necessary.

Equality is that much greater when different human conditions are regarded as not being more or less than each other, but simply as other. Let the professions of miner and cabinet minister be simply two different vocations; like that of poet and mathematician. Let the material hardships attached to the condition of the miner be counted toward the honour of those who suffer them.

In times of war, if an army has the right kind of spirit, a soldier is happy and proud to be under fire and not in headquarters; a general is happy and proud that the outcome of the battle hinges on his thinking; and all the while the soldier admires the general and the general admires the soldier. An equilibrium like that constitutes an equality. There would be equality in social conditions were this equilibrium to be found in them.

This presupposes that each condition have forms of recognition proper to it and that they not be lies.

VI. Hierarchy is a vital need of the human soul. It is constituted by a certain veneration, a certain dedication to superiors considered not in respect of their persons nor the power they exercise, but as symbols. What they are symbols of is that domain which is situated above all men and whose expression in this world is found in every man's obligations toward his fel- 125
low men. A genuine hierarchy presupposes that the superiors are aware of their role as symbol and know that it is the sole legitimate object of their subordinates' dedication. True hierarchy has the effect of leading each one to mentally settle into the place that he occupies.

VII. Honour is a vital need of the human soul. The respect due to every human being as such, even if it is actually given, is not enough to satisfy this need; for it is identical for all and changeless; whereas honour relates to a human being considered not simply as such, but within his social surroundings. This need is fully satisfied if each of the collectivities in which a human being is a member offers him a part in a tradition of greatness contained in its past and publicly acknowledged outside of it.

For example, to satisfy the need for honour within working life, each occupation must have a corresponding collectivity really capable of keeping |*like a treasure*| alive the memory of the treasures of greatness, heroism, probity, generosity, and genius displayed in the pursuit of the occupation.

All oppression creates a famine in respect of the need for honour since, owing to a lack of social prestige, the traditions of greatness possessed by the oppressed are not recognised.

This is always what results from conquest. Vercingétorix was not a hero to the Romans. Had the English conquered France in the 15th century, Joan of Arc would be long forgotten, even largely by us. Nowadays, we talk about her to the Annamites or the Arabs; but they know that in our country we hear nothing of their heroes or their saints; therefore the condition in which we maintain them is an injury to their honour.

Social oppression has the same effects. Guynemer and Mermoz have passed into the public consciousness, thanks to the social prestige of aviation; the at times incredible heroism displayed by some miners or fishermen has barely any resonance even in mining or fishing communities.

The ultimate deprivation of honour is that complete deprivation of con- 126
sideration that some categories of human beings are made to suffer. These are, in France, in varying ways, the prostitutes, felons, police informants,

the sub-proletariat of immigrants and colonial natives . . . Such categories should not exist.

Crime alone should place the being who committed it outside social consideration, and punishment should restore him to it.

VIII. Punishment is a vital need of the human soul. It is of two kinds, disciplinary and penal. Those of the first kind offer a safeguard against human failings, fighting against which would be too exhausting a struggle if there were no external support. But the punishment most indispensable to the soul is that for crime. Through crime a man puts himself outside the web of eternal obligations that links every human being to every other. He cannot be restored into it except by punishment, restored in full if there is consent on his part, imperfectly otherwise. Just as the only way to show respect to the one who suffers from hunger is to give him food, so the only means to show respect to the one who has placed himself outside the law is to restore him to the law by subjecting him to the punishment that the law prescribes.

The need for punishment is not satisfied when, as is generally the case, the penal code is only a system of coercion by terror.

Satisfaction of this need requires primarily that everything which concerns penal law have a solemn and sacred character; that the majesty of the law be imparted to the court, the police, the accused, the convicted, and this even in cases of little import, provided only that they might lead to the loss of freedom. Punishment must be an honour, it must not only erase the disgrace of the crime, but must be regarded as a |*obligation*| supplementary instruction that obliges a greater dedication to the public good. Also the severity of penalties must match the character of the obligations violated rather than the interests of public security.

The disrepute of the police, the frivolity of the judges, the prison regime, the permanent relegation of felons, the scale of penalties that stipulates
127 a much more grievous punishment for ten petty thefts than for a rape or some murders, and even stipulates punishments for simple misfortune, all this precludes the existence among us of anything that deserves the name punishment.

|*As for punishment*|

For misconduct as for crimes, the extent of the exemption from punishment should increase not when one moves up, but when one moves down the social ladder. Otherwise the suffering imposed is felt as coercion or even abuse of power, and does not constitute punishment. There

is no punishment unless the suffering is accompanied at some point, even after the fact in recollection, by a feeling of justice. Just as the musician awakens the feeling of beauty through sound, so the penal system must be able to awaken the feeling of justice in the criminal through pain, or even, when appropriate, through death. Just as one says of the apprentice who has injured himself that the trade is entering his body, so too punishment is a method for causing justice to enter the soul of the criminal through the suffering of the flesh.

The question of the best approach to prevent the emerging of a conspiracy at the top aiming to secure exemption from punishment is one of the hardest political problems to solve. It can only be solved if one or more men have the responsibility to prevent such a conspiracy, and they are in a position where they are not tempted to enter into one themselves.

IX. Freedom of opinion and freedom of association are usually mentioned together. This is a mistake. Save for the case of natural groupings, association is not a need, but an expedient of practical life.[6]

Total, unlimited freedom of |*opinion*| expression for any opinion whatsoever, without any restriction or reservation, is an absolute need for the intelligence. Therefore it is a need of the soul, for when the intelligence is ill at ease, the whole soul is ill. The nature and limits of the satisfaction cor- 128
responding to this need are inscribed in the very structure of the different faculties of the soul. For the same thing can be limited and unlimited, just as one can extend the length of a rectangle indefinitely without it ceasing to be limited in its width.

In a human being, the intelligence can be exercised in three ways. It can work on technical problems, that is search for the means to an already established goal. It can provide some light while the will's deliberation of the choice of a direction is taking place. Lastly, it can work alone, separate from other faculties, on a |*abstract*| purely theoretical speculation from which all concern for action has been provisionally set aside.

In a healthy soul, it is exercised in the three ways alternately, with varying degrees of freedom. In the first role, it is a servant. In the second role, it is destructive and ought to be silenced whenever it begins to provide

6 The word 'association' can mean associating with people in the sense of those whose society one keeps but also in the sense of forming an association with them. Weil's discussion focuses on the latter sense, which is also the legal meaning of the term.

arguments to the part of the soul that, in anyone who is not in a state of perfection, sides always with evil. But when it works alone and apart, it must possess a sovereign freedom. Otherwise the human being is in want of something essential.

The same goes for a healthy society. This is why it would be desirable to set up a preserve of absolute liberty in the sphere of publishing, but in such a way that it is understood that the works published within it do not commit the authors in any way and do not contain any advice for the readers. Here one could find all the arguments in favour of bad causes, set out in all their cogency. It is good and salutary that they be set out. Anybody could extol there what he most condemns. It would be common knowledge that the object of such works would be, not to define the authors' positions for facing life's problems, but to contribute, through preliminary
129 investigations, to the complete and correct enumeration of the data for each problem. The law would prevent their publication involving any risk of any kind for the author.

By contrast, publications intended to influence what is called opinion, meaning in fact the conduct of life, constitute actions and should be subject to the same restrictions as all actions. In other words, they should not be improperly prejudicial to any human being, and above all should never contain any denial, explicit or implicit, of the eternal obligations toward the human being, once these obligations have been solemnly recognised by the law.

The distinction between the two spheres, the one outside action and the one forming part of it, is impossible to formulate on paper in legal language. But this does not prevent it from being perfectly clear. The separation of these spheres is easy to establish in practice, if only the will to do so is strong enough.

It is clear for example that the whole of the daily and weekly press is situated within the second sphere. The periodicals too, for each of them is a hub for the diffusion of some way of thinking; only those that give up this function could lay claim to total freedom.

Likewise for literature. This would be a solution to the debate that arose recently on the subject of morality and literature, which solution was obscured by the fact that all people of talent found themselves, out of professional solidarity, on one side, and only fools and cowards on the other.

But the position of the fools and the cowards was nonetheless to a large extent consistent with reason. Writers have an unacceptable way of playing both sides. Never so much as in our time have they laid claim to the role

of directors of conscience and carried it out. In fact, during the years that preceded the war, no one challenged them for it, except the scientists. The place once occupied by priests in the moral life of the country was held by physicists and novelists, which is enough to judge the value of our progress. But if someone held the writers accountable for the direction of their influence, they would take refuge with indignation behind the sacred privilege of art for art's sake.

Without a doubt Gide, for example, has always known that books like *The* 130
Fruits of the Earth or *The Vatican Cellars* have had an influence on the ordinary conduct of life for hundreds of young people, and he has been proud of it. There is therefore no cause to put such books behind the untouchable barrier of art for art's sake, and to imprison a boy who throws someone from a moving train. One might just as well claim the privileges of art for art's sake in support of crime. A while ago the surrealists were not far from that. Everything that so many fools have repeated *ad nauseam* about the responsibility of writers in our defeat is, unfortunately, certainly true.

If a writer, thanks to the total freedom granted to pure intelligence, publishes writings contrary to the moral principles recognised by the law, and if he later becomes well-known as a locus of influence, it is easy to ask him whether he is ready to make it publicly known that these writings do not express his position. Should he prove unwilling, it is easy to punish him. If he lies, it is easy to discredit him. In addition, it has to be accepted that from the moment a writer becomes one of the influences guiding public opinion, he can no longer lay claim to unlimited liberty. Here too, a legal definition is impossible, but the facts are not really difficult to discern. There is no reason to limit the sovereignty of the law to the domain of things expressible in legal formulas, since this sovereignty is exercised just as much through judgments of equity.

In addition, the very need for freedom so essential to the intelligence requires a protection against suggestion, propaganda, or influence via obsession. These are all modes of coercion, a distinctive kind of coercion, that does not come with fear or physical pain, but which is no less violence. Modern technology supplies it with extremely efficacious instruments. This coercion is, by its nature, collective, and human souls are its victims.

The state, obviously, makes itself criminal if it makes use of them itself, except in the case of a manifest necessity for public safety. But it should moreover prevent their use. Advertising, for example, should be strictly limited by law; the volume should be very considerably reduced; it should

131 be strictly prohibited from ever touching upon topics that belong to the domain of thought.

Likewise, there could be curbs on the press, radio broadcasts, and anything similar, not only for flouting publicly recognised principles of morality, but for baseness of tone and thought, bad taste, vulgarity, or for having an insidiously corrupting moral ambiance. Such curbs can be applied without affecting freedom of opinion in the slightest. For example, a newspaper can be closed down without the editorial staff losing the right to publish wherever they like or even, in less serious cases, remaining together to continue the same newspaper under another name. Only, it will have been publicly marked by infamy and will risk being so again. Freedom of opinion is due exclusively, though subject to exceptions, to the journalist, not to the newspaper, for the journalist alone possesses the capacity to form an opinion.

Generally speaking, all the problems concerning freedom of expression are clarified if it is posited that this freedom is a need of the intelligence and that intelligence resides solely in the human being considered individually. There is no collective exercise of the intelligence. Therefore no group can legitimately lay claim to freedom of expression, because no group has the least need for it.

Quite the opposite, the protection of freedom of thought requires that the law prohibit a group from expressing an opinion. For once a group starts to have opinions, it tends inevitably to impose them on its members. Sooner or later individuals find themselves prevented, more or less strictly, on a number of more or less significant matters, from expressing opinions opposed to those of the group, unless they leave it. But the break with a group of which one is a member always leads to suffering, at least emotional suffering. And as much as danger or the possibility of suffering are healthy and necessary ingredients of action, so are they unhealthy in the exercise of the intelligence. |*It suffices for a*| A fear, however slight, always causes either
132 slackening or stiffening, depending on the extent of one's courage, and that is enough to deform the extremely delicate and fragile precision instrument forming the intelligence. Even friendship in this context is a great danger. The intelligence is overcome as soon as the expression of thoughts is preceded, explicitly or implicitly, by the little word "we". And when the light of the intelligence goes dark, soon enough the love of good goes astray.

The immediate practical solution is the abolition of political parties. Competition between parties, such as existed in the Third Republic, is unsustainable; the single party, which is incidentally the inevitable culmination of

this, is the utmost evil; there remains no other possibility than a public life without parties. Today, such an idea sounds new and audacious. So much the better, since something new is needed. But as a matter of fact this is simply the tradition of 1789. In the eyes of the people of 1789, there just were no other possibilities; a public life such as ours over the course of the last half-century would have seemed to them a hideous nightmare; they would never have believed it possible that a representative of the people could abdicate his dignity to the point of becoming a compliant party member.

Indeed Rousseau had shown clearly that competition between parties automatically kills the Republic. He had predicted its effects. It would be good | *to spread at this time* {*unreadable word*} | at this time to encourage the reading of *The Social Contract*. In fact, at present, everywhere where there were political parties, democracy is dead. Everyone knows that the English parties have traditions, spirit, and a role such that they are not comparable with any others. Everyone also knows that the rival teams in the United States are not political parties. A democracy where public life is constituted by the competition between political parties is incapable of preventing the formation of a party whose avowed goal is to destroy it. If the democracy derogates from 133
common law to address this, it is asphyxiating itself. If it does not do so, it is about as safe as a bird in front of a snake.

One would need to distinguish two kinds of groupings, those centred on interests, in which a certain degree of organisation and discipline would be allowed, and those centred on ideas, in which these would be strictly prohibited. In the current situation, it is good to permit people to group together to defend their interests, i.e. higher pay and such like, and to let these groupings act within very narrow limits and under the constant supervision of public authorities. But they must not be allowed to touch ideas. The groupings where thoughts are batted about should be less groupings than more or less fluid circles. When an action takes shape there, there is no reason for it to be carried out by others unless they approve of it.

In the workers movement for example, such a distinction would put to an end an intractable confusion. In the period before the war, the workers were constantly being pushed and pulled in three directions. First, the struggle for higher pay; next the remnants of the old trade union spirit of days gone by, increasingly weak but still with some life, idealistic and more or less libertarian; lastly the political parties. Frequently in the course of a strike, the workers who were suffering and fighting would have been quite incapable of figuring out whether it was a matter of wages, or an upsurge in the old

trade union spirit, or a political exercise undertaken by a party; and nobody from the outside could figure it out either.

Such a situation is impossible. When the war broke out, trade unions in France were dead or almost so, despite millions of members or because of them. They have resumed in embryonic form, after a long lethargy, as part
134 of the resistance against the invader. This does not prove that they are viable. It is completely clear that they had been all but killed by two poisons either one of which would have been fatal on its own.

Trade unions cannot go on if the workers in them are as obsessed with pennies as they are when doing piecework at the factory. First of all because it results in the kind of moral death always caused by |*the worry about*| the obsession with money. Next, because in the present social conditions the trade union, being now a factor which is continually acting in the economic life of the country, inevitably ends up by being transformed into a single, mandatory, professional organisation brought into lockstep with officialdom. It has then become like a corpse.

On the other hand, it is no less clear that trade unionism cannot fare well at the side of political parties. That is an impossibility of a piece with the laws of mechanics. For an analogous reason, indeed, the Socialist Party cannot fare well at the side of the Communist Party, because the latter possesses the character of a party, so to speak, to a much greater degree.

What is more, the obsession with wages strengthens communist influence because questions of money, though a keen concern for almost every man, simultaneously create for every man a boredom so deadly that the apocalyptic prospect of the revolution, in the communist rendering, is essential to compensate for it. If the middle classes do not have the same need for apocalypse, this is because large sums have a poetry, a prestige that tempers somewhat the boredom linked to money, whereas money counted in pennies is boredom in its pure state. Besides, the taste of the upper and lower middle classes for fascism shows that, despite everything, they too are bored.

The Vichy Government has created single and mandatory trade organi-
135 sations for workers in France.[7] It is regrettable that, following the modern fashion, it should have given them the name corporation, which designates in reality something so very different and so beautiful. But it is fortunate that

7 Vichy passed a law in 1941 abrogating and amalgamating the unions into a limited number of organisations representing sectors, employers, workers, etc.

these dead organisations should be there to take on the dead part of trade union activity. It would be dangerous to do away with them. It is far better to charge them with the day-to-day work of higher pay and so-called immediate demands. As for the political parties, if in a general climate of freedom they were all strictly prohibited, one would hope that their clandestine existence would at least be difficult.

In that event, the workers' trade unions, should there still be a spark of genuine life left in them, could again become little by little the expression of workers' thought, the voice of workers' honour. Following in the tradition of the French workers movement, which has always regarded itself as responsible for the whole universe, the unions would then take an interest in everything touching upon justice—including, if need be, questions of higher pay, but only now and then and in order to save human beings from destitution. Obviously, they would have to be able to exercise an influence on the trade organisations in ways defined by law.

It might perhaps be advantageous to prohibit trade organisations from calling a strike and to permit trade unions to do so, with some reservations, by pairing risks with this responsibility, prohibiting any coercion, and protecting the continuity of economic life.

As to the lock-out, there is no reason not to prohibit it altogether.

Licence for groupings centred on ideas should be subject to two conditions. First, that there be no excommunication. Joining would be done freely on the basis of affinity, without at any time anyone being asked to sign up to a set of precepts crystallised in written statements; but once admitted a member could not be expelled except for something dishonourable or for the offence of traitorous infiltration; an offence that would in any case imply an illegal organisation and would therefore expose him to a more serious punishment.

Here we would truly have a measure of public safety, experience having 136
shown that totalitarian states are created by totalitarian parties, and that totalitarian parties are forged by expulsions for the offence of contrary opinion.

The other condition might be that there should be a real flow of ideas, and tangible evidence of this flow, in the form of pamphlets, reviews or typed bulletins in which problems of a general nature were examined. Too great a uniformity of opinion would make a group suspect.

In other respects all groupings centred on ideas would be permitted to operate as they see fit, on condition of not violating the law and not coercing their members by any form of group discipline.

As for groupings centred on interests, their supervision would have to involve first of all a distinction; namely that the word interest sometimes expresses a need and sometimes something altogether different. In the case of a poor worker, interest means food, housing, and warmth. For a boss, it means something different. When the word is taken in its first sense, the action of public authorities should consist principally in motivating, supporting, and protecting the defence of interests. In the other case, the activity of groupings centred on interests should be continually controlled, limited and whenever necessary curbed by the public authorities. It goes without saying that the strictest limits and the most |*severe*| painful punishments are appropriate for those who are by nature the most powerful.

What has been called |*generally*| freedom of association has so far been in fact freedom for associations. But associations are not supposed to be free; they are instruments, they must be subservient. Freedom is appropriate only for human beings.

As to freedom of thought, |*it is true*| it is largely true to say that without it there is no thought. But it is even more true to say that when thought is non-existent, it is not free either. There has been plenty of freedom of thought in recent years, but there was no thought. It is a bit like the case of a child who, not having any meat, asks for some salt to put on it.

137 X. Security is an essential need of the soul. Security means that the soul is not under the weight of fear or terror, except as the effect of an accidental concurrence of circumstances and for rare and short periods. Fear or terror as enduring states of mind are well-nigh fatal poisons, whether the cause is the possibility of unemployment, police repression, the presence of a foreign conqueror, expectation of a probable invasion, or any other adversity that seems to surpass human strength.

Roman masters displayed a whip in the vestibule for the slaves to see, knowing that this sight put their souls into that half-dead state indispensable to slavery. In contrast, according to the Egyptians, the just must be able to say after death, "I have not caused fear to anyone."

Even if permanent fear is solely latent, in such a way as to be only rarely felt as suffering, it is always a malady. It is a semi-paralysis of the soul.

XI. Risk is an essential need of the soul. The absence of risk gives rise to a kind of boredom that paralyses differently than fear, but almost as much. What is more, there are situations that, involving a generalised anxiety without specific risks, spread both maladies at once.

Risk is a danger that elicits a considered reaction; that is, that does not overwhelm the wherewithal of the soul to the point of crushing it under fear. In some cases, it contains an element of fun; in other cases, when a specific obligation pushes a man into facing it, it becomes the highest possible stimulus.

The protection of men against fear and terror does not imply the elimination of risk; it implies on the contrary the permanent presence of a certain amount of risk in all aspects of social life; for the absence of risk enfeebles courage to the point of leaving the soul, should the need arise, without the least inner protection against fear. What is needed is only that the risk arises in conditions where it is not transformed into a sense of fatalism.

XII. Private property is a vital need of the soul. The soul is isolated, lost, if it is not in a surround of objects which seem to it like an extension of its limbs. Every man is irresistibly drawn to think of as his own everything 138
which he has made a long and continual use of for work, pleasure or the necessities of life. Thus a gardener, after a while, feels that the garden is his. But where the feeling of ownership does not coincide with legal property, the man is under constant threat of having things wrenched away painfully.

If private property is recognised as a need, it implies that everyone should have the possibility of possessing things other than the objects of everyday consumption. The details of this need vary a lot depending on circumstances; but it is desirable that most people be the owner of their own home and a bit of land around it and, when there is no practical impossibility, the implements for their work. Land and livestock number among the implements for work in the countryside.

The principle of private property is violated when land is worked by agricultural workers and farm labourers under the orders of a |*administrator*| manager, and owned by townsfolk who receive the income from it. For of all those who have a relationship with that land, there is no one who is not in one way or another estranged from it. The land is wasted, not from the standpoint of wheat, but from the standpoint of the satisfaction that it could offer the need for property.

Between this extreme and the other one of the farmer who cultivates the land that he owns with his family, there are many intermediate cases where men's need for ownership is overlooked to a greater or lesser extent.

XIII. Participation in collective property, participation consisting not in material enjoyment, but in a feeling of ownership, is a no less important

need. It is a matter of a state of mind rather than a legal provision. Where there is a genuine civic life, each feels he is personally the owner of public monuments, gardens, or the grandeur displayed in ceremonies, and in this way the luxury that almost all human beings desire is granted to even the poorest. But it is not just the state which must provide this satisfaction, it is every type of collectivity.

139 A large modern factory represents a waste with respect to the need for property. Neither the workers, nor the managing director who is in the pay of a board of directors, nor the members of the board who never see the factory, nor the shareholders who are ignorant of its existence, can find in it the least satisfaction of this need.

When the modes of exchange and acquisition lead to the waste of nourishment, material and moral, they are to be transformed.

There is no natural connection between property and money. The connection established today is merely the effect of a system in which the thrust of every possible motive has been concentrated upon money. Since this system is unhealthy, the converse decoupling must be brought about.

The true criterion, with regard to property, is that it is legitimate insofar as it is real. Or more exactly, laws concerning property are better the more they make the best use of the possibilities contained in the goods of this world for the satisfaction of the need for property common to all men.

In consequence, the current modes of acquisition and possession must be transformed in the name of the principle of property. Every type of possession that does not satisfy someone's need for private or collective property can be reasonably regarded as invalid.

This does not mean that it should be transferred to the state, but rather that an attempt should be made to turn it into a bona fide property.

| XIV. Rootedness is perhaps the most essential need and the most |[8]

140 XIV.[9] The need for truth is more sacred than any other. Yet no mention is ever made of it. One becomes afraid to read once one has realised the quantity and the enormity of material falsehoods shamelessly on display even in books by authors of the highest repute. One then reads as one would drink water from a suspect well.

8 Weil originally omitted truth as a need, but she inserted it later.

9 This section number and the next are in Arabic numerals in the manuscript, suggesting that Weil composed them later.

There are men who work eight hours a day and make the great effort to read in the evening so as to learn. They are unable to devote themselves to verifying matters in major libraries. They take the book at its word. One has no right to feed them falsehoods. What is the point in claiming that the authors act in good faith? They do not do physical work eight hours a day. Society provides for them so that they might have free time and take the trouble to avoid mistakes. A signalman causing a derailment would not be well-received when insisting that he acted in good faith.

All the more reason that it is shameful to tolerate the existence of newspapers about which everyone knows that no employee could stay on if he did not sometimes consent to knowingly distort the truth.

The public distrusts newspapers, but its distrust does not protect it. Knowing that by and large a newspaper includes both truths and lies, the public divides news reports under these two rubrics, but at random, in accord with its likes and dislikes. It is thus lost to error.

Everyone knows that when journalism is made indistinguishable from organised lying, it is a crime. Yet it is believed that it is an unpunishable crime. Whatever could it be that prevents punishing an activity once it has been recognised as criminal? Wherever could this strange conception of non-punishable crimes come from? It is one of the most monstrous distortions of the legal mind.

Is it not about time to declare that every identifiable crime is punishable, and that we are resolved, if we have the opportunity, to punish every crime?

A few simple public health measures would protect the population against attacks on the truth.

The first would be the establishing, for the purpose of this protection, special courts, with a high standing, composed of specially chosen and trained judges. They would be required to punish any avoidable error with public condemnation, and would be able to impose a prison sentence and hard labour in 141
cases of |*bad*| frequent recidivism aggravated by demonstrated bad faith.

For example a lover of Ancient Greece, reading in Maritain's latest book, "The greatest thinkers of antiquity had not thought to condemn slavery," would bring Maritain before one of these courts.[10] He would take to it the

10 The editors of the *Oeuvres complètes* have identified this book as *Les Droits de l'homme et la loi naturelle* [*The Rights of Man and Natural Law*] (New York: Éditions de la Maison française, coll. "Civilisation", 1942).

only important text on slavery that has come down to us, the one by Aristotle. There he would read to the judges the sentence, "a few claim that slavery is absolutely contrary to nature and reason."[11] He would observe that nothing allows us to suppose that these few were not among the greatest thinkers of antiquity. The court would censure Maritain for having published a false statement, when it was so easy for him to avoid the mistake, which statement constituted, however unintentionally, an outrageous calumny against an entire civilisation. All the daily newspapers, the weeklies and others, all the periodicals and the radio would be under an obligation to bring to the public's attention the court's censure and, if appropriate, Maritain's response. In this particular case there could hardly be one.

On the day when *Gringoire*[12] published *in extenso* a speech attributed to a Spanish anarchist who had been announced as speaker at a meeting in Paris, but who had in fact, at the last moment, not been able to leave Spain, such a court would not have been superfluous. The bad faith in such a case being as evident as two and two makes four, prison or hard labour would not perhaps have been too severe.

Under this system, anyone at all who recognised an avoidable error in a published text or in a radio broadcast would be allowed to bring a charge before these courts.

142 The second measure would be to prohibit absolutely all propaganda of any kind through the radio or the daily press. The use of these two channels would only be allowed for unbiased information.

The courts mentioned above would make sure that information is not biased.

In regard to mass media they might have to judge not only erroneous claims, but also intentional and biased omissions.

The milieux in which ideas circulate and where there is a desire to make them known would have a right only to publications with a weekly, fortnightly or monthly frequency. There is no need whatsoever for greater frequency if one wants to make people think and not to stupefy them.

The accuracy of the mediums of persuasion would be ensured by the supervision of these same courts, which would be able to close down a

11 It would seem that Weil has in mind the discussion from *Politics* 1255a1–13, where a claim somewhat weaker than the one Weil suggests is made.

12 A right-wing political journal founded in 1928.

publication for distorting the truth too frequently. Though its editors could resurrect it under a different name.

In all of this there would not be the slightest attack on public liberties. What there would be is |*protection*| the satisfaction of the most sacred need of the human soul, the need for protection against suggestion and error.

But, it will be objected, who guarantees the impartiality of the judges? The sole guarantee apart from their total independence, is their being drawn from very different social backgrounds, being naturally endowed with a broad, clear and precise intelligence, and being instructed in a school where they receive an education not juridical, but above all spiritual and intellectual second. They must thereby accustom themselves to loving the truth.

There is no possibility of satisfying the need for truth in a people if one cannot find to this end men who love the truth.

XV. Rootedness is perhaps the most important and most overlooked need of the human soul. It is one of the most difficult to define. A human being takes root through his real, active, and natural participation in the existence of a collectivity that keeps alive certain treasures of the past and certain 143
expectations about the future. Natural participation, that is to say one resulting automatically from his location, birth, profession, and surroundings. Each human being needs to have multiple roots. He needs to get almost the whole of his psychological, intellectual, and spiritual life through the intermediary of the milieux of which he is naturally a part.

The interaction of influences between very different milieux is no less essential than rootedness in natural surroundings. But any given milieu should take in an external influence not as an infusion, but as a stimulus that makes its own life more vigorous. It should draw sustenance from external infusions only after having digested them, and the individuals who compose the milieu should only get these infusions by way of it. When a painter of real merit exhibits in a museum, his originality is thereby confirmed. It should be the same for the various peoples of the globe and the different social milieux.

There is uprooting every time there is military conquest, and in this sense conquest is almost always an evil. Uprooting is at its least when the conquerors are immigrants who settle in the conquered country, mixing with the population and taking root themselves. Such was the case with the Hellenes in Greece, the Celts in Gaul, and the Moors in Spain. But when the conqueror remains alien to the territory of which he has taken possession, uprooting is

an almost fatal disease for the subject populations. It reaches the most acute level when there are massive deportations, such as in Europe occupied by Germany or in the Niger Bend, or when there is brutal suppression of all the local traditions, such as in the French possessions in Oceania (if one believes Gauguin and Alain Gerbault).

Even without military conquest, |*the influence*| the power of money and
144 economic domination can impose an alien influence to the point of causing |*the phenomenon*| the disease of uprooting.

Finally, social relations within a single country can be very dangerous factors in uprooting. In our lands, in our time, setting aside the conquest of France, there are two poisons that proliferate this malady.[13] One is money. Money destroys the roots wherever it penetrates, by replacing all motives with the desire for gain. It readily outweighs other motives because it requires so much less effort of attention. Nothing is as clear and as simple as a numerical figure.

Oeuvres complètes V:2

This is an extract from a book-length essay published under the title of *The Need for Roots* (*L'Enracinement*). Weil considered this her second magnum opus after the much shorter "Reflections concerning the causes of liberty and social oppression" from 1934. Written in 1943 while Weil was working in London on a new constitution for a liberated France, this extract describes two of Weil's foundations for that project: the priority of obligations over rights and the universal obligation of justice in relation to the needs of the soul as well as of the body.

13 The second poison of the two mentioned, given on manuscript page 145, is introduced thus: "For the second factor in uprooting is education as it is conceived today".

7

IS THERE A MARXIST DOCTRINE?

Many people declare themselves to be adversaries or advocates, or ambivalent advocates, of Marxist doctrine. One hardly thinks to ask oneself: did Marx have a doctrine? One does not imagine that a thing that has excited so many controversies might not exist. Yet this is often the case. The question is worth the trouble of posing and examining. After an attentive examination, there may be cause to answer in the negative. 306

It is generally agreed that Marx is a materialist. He has not always been so. In his youth, he had set out to develop a philosophy of work in a spirit that was at bottom very close to that of Proudhon. A philosophy of work is not materialist. It arranges all the problems relating to man around an act which, constituting a direct and real hold on matter, encapsulates the relation of man with the term opposing him. This opposing term is matter. Man is not reduced to it, he is set against it.

On this path, the young Marx did not even start the draft of a draft. He supplied little more than a few indications. Proudhon for his part only shed a few flashes of light amid a lot of smoke. Such a philosophy remains to be done. It is perhaps indispensable. It is perhaps more particularly a need of this day and age. Various signs indicate that in the last century it was developing in embryonic form. But |*no child was born*| nothing came of it. Maybe it is a creation reserved for our century.

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Marx was stopped while still young by an accident very common in the
307 19th century; he took himself seriously. He was seized by a sort of messianic illusion which made him believe that a decisive role was reserved for him in the salvation of humankind. In consequence, he was unable to retain the capacity to think in the full sense of the word. As for the philosophy of work that was germinating in him, he abandoned it, though he continued, over time more and more rarely, to place here and there in his writings formulations inspired by it. Being unable to develop a doctrine, he took up the two most current beliefs of his time, both poor, cursory, and mediocre, and moreover impossible to hold jointly. One is scientism, the other is utopian socialism.

In order to adopt them jointly, he gave them a fictional unity by means of formulations which, were one to press for their meaning, reveals them ultimately as nothing more than a bit of sentiment. But when an author chooses his words skilfully, the reader is rarely so impolite as to pose such a question. The less meaning a formulation has, the thicker the veil which covers the illegitimate contradictions within a |*doctrine*| thought.

It is not, of course, that Marx ever had the intention of deceiving his audience. The audience he needed to deceive to be able to go on was himself. That is why he surrounded the foundation of his conception with metaphysical clouds that, when they are looked at steadily for a while, become transparent, revealing themselves to be empty.

But these two systems which he took over ready-made, not only did he fabricate a fictional connection between them, he also rethought them. His mind, while one notch below that required to come up with a doctrine, was capable of ideas of genius. There are some compact, immutable fragments of truth in his works which have a natural place in any true doctrine. This is why they are not only compatible with Christianity, but of infinite value to it. They must be taken up from Marx. This is all the easier since what is today called Marxism, that is to say the current of thought that lays claim to Marx, makes no use of it. The truth is too dangerous to touch. It is explosive.

The scientism of the 19th century was the belief that the science of the time would provide a definite answer to all the problems, without exception, likely to arise for men, by means of a simple development along lines already set out by the results obtained. What has happened in fact is that, after hav-
308 ing expanded a bit, science itself has broken down. The one in favour today, though it derives from the earlier one, is a different science. The one from the 19th century has been respectfully deposited in the museum with the label: classical science.

It was well-constructed, simple and homogenous. Mechanics was its queen. Physics was its centre. Since it was the branch that had obtained by far the most brilliant results, it naturally had a great influence on all the other disciplines. The idea of studying man as a physicist studies inert matter had therefore to become ascendant, and was indeed very widespread. Yet man was scarcely thought of except as an individual instance. Matter was consequently flesh; or else one endeavoured to define a psychological equivalent of the atom. Those who reacted against this fixation on the individual were also reacting against scientism.

Marx was the first and if I'm not mistaken the only one—since his research was not continued—to have had the double thought of taking society as fundamental human fact and of studying in it, as the physicist does in matter, the relations of force.

That is an idea of genius in the full sense of the word. It is not a doctrine. It is a device for study, research, exploration and perhaps for the construction of any doctrine that does not risk falling to pieces on contact with a truth.

Marx, having had this idea, hastened to make it sterile, as far as it lay within him to do so, by putting over it a veneer of the wretched scientism of his time. Or rather Engels, who was far inferior to him and knew it, performed this operation for him; but Marx covered it up with his authority. This resulted in a system in which the power relations that define social structure entirely determine both the destiny and the thoughts of men. Such a system is pitiless. In it force is everything; it leaves no hope for justice. It does not even leave the hope of conceiving it truthfully, since thoughts only reflect the power relations.

But Marx was a generous soul. The sight of injustice really caused him, one might say, to suffer bodily. This suffering was severe enough to keep him from going on with his life had he not had the hope of a near-term, |*almost immediate*,| earthly reign of comprehensive justice. For him as for many, need was the primary evidence.

Most human beings do not question the truth of a thought without which they literally could not go on living. Arnolphe did not question Agnès' fidelity.[1] The supreme choice for every soul is perhaps this choice between 309
truth and life. Whoever wants to save their life will lose it.[2] This would be

1 Two characters from Molière's *The School for Scandal*, 1777. See "Forms of the Implicit Love of God", manuscript page 328.

2 Mt 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24.

a light sentence if it fell only on those who are not prepared to die under any circumstance. They are after all rare enough. It becomes terrible when applied to those who refuse to forsake thoughts, even if false, without which they feel they cannot go on living.

The conception |*of social*| of justice current at the time of Marx was that of the socialism which he himself named utopian. It was very poor as an effort at thought, but as sentiment it was generous and humane, desiring liberty, dignity, comfort, happiness and every possible good for all. Marx adopted it. He only attempted to make it more precise, and in doing so added some interesting ideas to it, but nothing that is really first-rate.

What he did change is the character of hope. A probability based on human progress would not be enough for him. His anguish needed certainty. One does not base a certainty on man. If the 18th century had that illusion |*some*| at times—and it only had it at times—the convulsions of the Revolution and of war had been horrendous enough to correct it.

In previous centuries, people who were in need of certainty relied on God for it. The philosophy of the 18th century and the marvels of technology had seemed to carry man so high that this habit was lost. Subsequently however, the radical inadequacy of all things human having become evident once more, one needed to look for support. God was outmoded. Matter was adopted. Man cannot bear for more than a moment to be alone desiring the good. He must have an omnipotent ally. If one does not believe in the remote, silent, secret omnipotence of a spirit, then there is nothing but the evident omnipotence of matter.

That is the unavoidable absurdity of every |*materialist*| materialism. If the materialist could dismiss all concern for the good, he would be perfectly coherent. But he cannot. The very being of man is nothing other than a perpetual straining towards an unknown good. And the materialist is a man. This is why he cannot help but end up regarding matter as a machine for fabricating good.

The essential contradiction in human life is that man, whose very being
310 is the straining towards the good, is at the same time subject in his entire being, in his thought as in his flesh, to a blind force, to a necessity absolutely indifferent to the good. That is how it is; and this is why no human thought can escape contradiction. Far from contradiction being always the criterion of error, |*there is*| it is sometimes a sign of truth. Plato knew this. But cases can be differentiated. There is a legitimate and an illegitimate use of contradiction.

The illegitimate use consists in coupling incompatible thoughts as if they were compatible. The legitimate use, when two incompatible thoughts appear before the mind, consists in first exhausting all the resources of the intelligence to try to eliminate at least one of the two. If this is impossible, if both of them are compelling, then one must acknowledge the contradiction as a fact.[3] Thereafter it must be used like a two-pronged tool, like a pair of pincers, to enter by means of it into direct contact with the transcendent domain of truth inaccessible to human faculties. The contact is direct, though made through an intermediary, just like the sense of touch is directly affected by the roughness of a table over which one is moving, not one's hand, but a pencil. This contact is real, despite being part of the things that by nature are |*unthinkable*| impossible, since it concerns a contact between the mind and that which is not thinkable. It is supernatural, but real.

This legitimate use of contradiction as a passage into the transcendent has an equivalent, an image so to speak, very common in mathematics. It plays an essential role in Christian dogma, it can be observed in the Trinity, the Incarnation or any other example. It is the same in other traditions. This might be a criterion for identifying authentic religious and philosophical traditions.[4]

It is above all the essential contradiction, the contradiction between the good and necessity or the equivalent one between justice and force, whose use constitutes a criterion. The good and necessity, as Plato put it, are separated by an infinite distance. They have nothing in common. They are totally other. Although we are compelled to ascribe a unity to them, this unity is a mystery; it remains for us a secret. The contemplation of this unknown unity is authentic religious life.

Fabricating a fictitious, erroneous equivalent of this unity, which would be 311
graspable by human faculties, is the basis for inferior forms of religious life. To every authentic form of religious life there corresponds an inferior form, which is seemingly based on the same doctrine, but does not comprehend

3 Weil's thought, developed in her notebooks and in some ways adapting the ideas of her mentor, Alain, is that a genuine contradiction makes evident limitations in one conception of reality. Grasping a genuine contradiction makes it legitimate to look for a further conception of reality—one that is higher in the sense of being more comprehensive—in which the contradiction does not appear.

4 In her notebooks Weil often discusses the contemplation of paradoxical questions, such as the koans typical of Zen Buddhism.

it. But the converse is not true. There are ways of thinking that are only compatible with a religious life of inferior quality.

In this regard materialism as a whole, in so far as it attributes to matter the automatic fabrication of the good, is to be classified among the inferior forms of religious life. This holds true even for the bourgeois economists of the 19th century, the apostles of liberalism, who have a veritably religious tone when they speak of production. It holds true even more so for Marxism. Marxism is very much a religion, in the most impure sense of this word. Notably it has in common with all the inferior forms of religious life the fact of having been continually used, in the so apt words of Marx, as an opium of the people.

Moreover a spirituality like that of Plato is only separated from materialism by a subtle difference, one infinitely small. He says, not that good is an automatic product of necessity, but that the Spirit rules necessity through persuasion; it persuades it to make most things that happen turn towards the good; and necessity is overcome by this wise persuasion. Likewise Aeschylus said, "God does not arm himself with violence. All that is divine is effortless. Dwelling on high, his wisdom yet succeeds in operating from there, from his pure throne." The same thought is found in China, in India, and in Christianity. It is expressed by the first line of the Our Father,[5] which would be better translated, "Our father, the one from heaven"; and better still by the marvellous saying, "Your father who is in secret."[6]

The part played by the supernatural here below lies in the secret, the silence, the infinitely small. But the operation of this infinitely small is decisive. Proserpine thought she was not committing herself to anything when, half-coerced, half-seduced, she consented to eat one single pomegranate seed; but from that instant, forevermore, the other world was her kingdom and her homeland. A pearl in a field is scarcely visible. The mustard seed is the smallest of seeds . . .

The decisive operation of the infinitely small is a paradox; human intelligence has trouble acknowledging it; but nature, which is a mirror of divine
312 truths, presents images of it everywhere. For example, catalysts, bacteria and fermenting enzymes. Relative to a solid body, a point is something infinitely

5 Mt 6:9ff.
6 Mt 6:6.

small. However, there is in each body a point that surpasses its entire mass, such that if this point is supported, the body does not fall. The keystone of an arch bears the whole edifice above it. Archimedes said, "Give me a bearing point and I could lift the world." The silent presence of the supernatural here below is this bearing point. That is why, in the early centuries, the Cross was compared to a scales.

If a completely isolated island had only ever been peopled with the blind, light would be for them what the supernatural is for us. One is tempted to believe at first that for them light would be nothing, that in making a physics for their use in which any theory of light was absent one would give them a complete explanation of their world. For light does not collide, does not press, does not weigh anything, and is not eaten. For them, it is absent. But one cannot leave it out of the account. By it alone the trees and the plants rise towards the sky despite gravity. By it alone are ripened the grains, the fruits and all that we eat.

In assigning to the good and necessity a transcendent unity, one gives the essential human problem an |*incomprehensible truth*| incomprehensible solution, especially when one adds to it, as one must, the still more incomprehensible belief that something of this transcendent unity communicates itself to those who, without understanding it, without being able to make any use of either their intelligence or their will in regard to it, contemplate it with love and desire.

That which eludes human faculties cannot, by definition, be either verified or refuted. But it issues in consequences that are situated at the level below, within the domain accessible to our faculties; these consequences can be subject to a verification. In fact this test is passed. A second indirect verification takes the form of universal agreement. At first sight the great variety of religions and philosophies might indicate that this proof is not there; this consideration has even led many minds to scepticism. But a more attentive examination shows that, except in nations that have subordinated their spiritual lives to imperialism, every religion embraces in its innermost core a mystical doctrine; and though the mystical doctrines vary among themselves, they are not just similar but absolutely identical on a certain number of essential points. A third indirect verification is that of inner experience. 313
This is an indirect proof, |*despite it being an experience*| even for those who have the experience, in the sense that it is an experience that eludes their faculties; they grasp only its outward appearance and they know so. Yet they also know

its meaning. There have been, down through the centuries, a small number of human beings evidently incapable of not only lying but also autosuggestion, whose testimony on this matter is decisive.

These three proofs are perhaps the only ones possible; but they are adequate. One can add to them the equivalent of a proof by *reductio ad absurdum* by examining the other solutions, those that fabricate a fictitious unity for the good and necessity at the level of human faculties. They have absurd consequences whose absurdity is at once verifiable by reasoning and experience.

Among all the inadequate solutions, the best by far, the most useful, and perhaps the only ones that contain fragments of pure truth are the materialist solutions. Materialism accounts for everything, with the exception of the supernatural. This is not a small gap, since in the supernatural everything is contained and infinitely surpassed. But if one does not take account of the supernatural, one is right to be a materialist. This universe, absent the supernatural, is only matter. In describing it only as matter, one is grasping a particle of truth. In describing it as a combination of matter and of specifically mental forces that would be of this world, that would be on the level of nature, one falsifies everything.[7] This is why for a Christian, the writings of Marx are far more valuable, for example, than those of Voltaire and the Encyclopedists, who found a way to be atheists without being materialists. They were atheists, not simply in the sense that they excluded more or less neatly the notion of a personal God, which is the case for certain Buddhist sects which in spite of this have risen as far as the mystical life, but in the sense that they excluded everything that is not of this world. They believed, the naïfs, that justice is of this world. That is the extremely dangerous illusion embedded in what are called the principles of 1789, secular faith, and so on.

Among all the forms of materialism, Marx's work contains one extremely valuable clue, though he hardly made any real use of it, and his followers less so still. It is the idea of non-physical matter. Marx, rightly regarding

7 The word translated as 'mental' here is the French 'morale', the feminine form of 'moral'. 'Mental' better captures what Weil means in opposition to the physical. The word 'moral' in French, in addition to the ethical sense has, unlike English, a sense that is similar to the English 'mental'. This sense survives in infrequently-used English phrases such as 'moral certainty' and 'moral sciences'. Indeed, the muddle between the meanings of the English words 'morale' (e.g. soldiers' morale) and 'moral' in relation to their French counterparts was the subject of impassioned debate in the early 20th century as discussed in the entry on 'moral' in Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1926).

society as being in this world the primordial human fact, paid attention only 314
to social matter; but one can, secondly, consider psychological matter in the same way; there are several trends in this direction in modern psychology although, if I'm not mistaken, this idea has not been spelled out. A few common preconceptions hinder doing so.

The idea is the following; it is indispensable to any sound doctrine; it is central. Beneath all phenomena on the level of the mental, whether collective or individual, there is something analogous to matter proper. Something analogous, not matter itself. That is why the systems Marx classified under what he called mechanical materialism, with a touch of justified contempt, systems that seek to explain all human thought through a physiological mechanism, are nothing but foolishness. Thoughts are subject to a mechanism of their own. But it is a mechanism. When we think of matter, we think of a mechanical system of forces subject to a blind and strict necessity. It is the same for that non-tangible matter that is the substance of our thoughts. Only it is very difficult to grasp the idea of force in it and to conceive the laws of this necessity.

| The analogy is a valuable guide |

But even before having got this far, it is already extremely useful to know that this distinctive necessity exists. This helps to avoid *| a double error |* two errors into which one falls over and over, indeed as soon as one gets out of the first one falls into the other. The first is to believe that mental phenomena are modelled on material phenomena; for example, that mental well-being arises automatically and exclusively out of physical well-being. The other is to believe that mental phenomena are arbitrary and that they can be occasioned by autosuggestion or external suggestion, or even by an act of will.

They are not subject to physical necessity, but they are subject to necessity. They are affected by the impact of physical phenomena, but a distinctive impact, consistent with the laws proper to the necessity to which they are subject. Everything that is real is subject to necessity. There is nothing more real than imagination; what is imagined is not real, but the state the imagination is in is a fact. A certain state of the imagination being given, it cannot be changed unless the causes likely to produce such an effect are brought into play. These causes have no direct relation to the things imagined; but on the other hand they are not just anything. The relation of cause and effect is 315
as strictly determined within this domain as within that of gravity. It is just harder to know.

The mistakes made on this point are innumerable and are the cause of innumerable sufferings in daily life. For example, if a child says that he feels ill, and does not go to school, then all of a sudden finds the strength to play with his little chums, the indignant family thinks that he lied. He is told, "Considering you had the strength to play, you also had the strength to work." Yet the child could very well have been sincere. He was held back by a real feeling of exhaustion that the sight of his little chums and the appeal of the game really did make disappear, whereas his studies did not contain a sufficient stimulus to produce this effect. Similarly, it is naïve on our part to be surprised when we make a firm resolution and do not hold to it. Something stimulated us to make the resolution, but this something was not strong enough to push us to see it through; what is more, the very act of making the resolution might have used up the stimulus thereby impeding even a start on carrying it out. This is what often happens when it comes to extremely difficult actions. The well-known case of St. Peter is probably an example of it.

Ignorance of this kind is constantly at work, vitiating the relations between governments and its people, and between the ruling classes and the masses. For example, bosses can conceive only two ways to make their workers happy; either raising their wages, or telling them they are happy and chasing off the wicked communists who assure them of the contrary. They cannot understand that, on the one hand, the happiness of a worker consists above all in a certain state of mind in relation to his work; and, on the other, that this state of mind appears only if certain objective conditions are realised, conditions impossible to know without a serious study. This double truth, suitably transposed, is the key to all practical problems of human life.

Within the dynamics of that necessity which governs the thoughts and actions of men, the relationships between society and the individual are very complex. But the primacy of the social is plain to see. Marx was right to begin by positing the reality of a social matter, of a social necessity, whose laws must at least be glimpsed before venturing to think about the destiny of humankind.

This idea was original relative to its times; but absolutely speaking it was
316 not so. That said, probably no truth is really original. Working out a mechanics of social relations was probably the true intention of Machiavelli, who was a great mind. But much further back Plato had the reality of social necessity constantly in mind.

Plato felt very keenly that above all social matter is an infinitely harder to overcome obstacle between the soul and the good than is the flesh itself. This is also the Christian thought. St. Paul says that the struggle is not against the flesh, but against the devil; and the devil is at home in social matter, since he was able to say to Christ, when showing him the kingdoms of this world, "I will give you this power and the glory attached to it, for they have been ceded to me."[8] Thus is he called the Prince of this world. Because he is the father of lies, social matter is therefore the quintessential medium for the cultivation and proliferation of lies and error. That is assuredly Plato's thought. He compared society to an enormous animal that men are compelled to serve and whose reactions they study in order to draw from them their convictions concerning good and evil. Christianity has kept this image. The beast of the Apocalypse is sister to the one in Plato.

The central, essential thought of Plato, also a Christian thought, is that all men are absolutely incapable of having opinions about good and evil other than those dictated by the reactions of the animal, except for predestined souls which a supernatural grace draws towards God.

He did not develop this thought much, though it is present behind everything he wrote, probably because he knew that the animal is spiteful and revenges itself. It is a subject for reflection left almost unexplored. It is very far from being an obvious truth; it is a truth very deeply hidden. It is hidden especially by conflicts of opinion. If two men are in violent disagreement about good and evil, it can be hard to believe that both of them are blindly subject to the opinion of the society surrounding them. In particular, the one who reflected on those few lines of Plato is very strongly tempted to explain the opinions of people with whom he disagrees by the influence of the animal, while explaining his own by a correct view of justice and the good. Yet one has not understood the truth formulated by Plato until one has recognised it as true for oneself.

In reality, in any given period, in a given social group, the differences in opinion are far fewer than it appears. There are far fewer differences than 317
conflicts. The most violent struggles often set people against each other who think exactly or almost exactly the same thing. Our time is very rich in paradoxes of this kind. The common foundation for the different currents

8 Lk 4:6.

of opinion at a given time is the opinion of the large animal at that time. For example, for the last ten years, every political persuasion, including the smallest factions, were accusing all the others, without exception, of fascism, and in return were subjected the same accusation; except, of course, those who regarded this epithet as praise. Probably the epithet was always partially justified. The European large animal of the 20th century has a pronounced taste for fascism. Another amusing example is the problem of the peoples of colour. Every country is very emotional on the subject of the unhappiness of those under the control of other countries, but is indignant if doubt is cast on the perfect happiness[9] which their own enjoy. There are many analogous cases, where the apparent difference in the attitudes is in reality an identity.

On the other hand, given the animal is enormous and the men very small, each one is differently situated in his relation to it. Taking Plato's imagery, one can imagine that among the people charged with grooming it, one takes care of a knee, another of a claw, another the neck, and another the back. It might like being tickled under the jaw and being patted on the back. One of its servants will consequently maintain that it is tickling which is the greatest of goods; another that it is patting. In other words, society is made up of groups that intersect in all sorts of ways, and the social morality varies from group to group. One could not find two individuals whose social milieus were truly identical; the milieu of each is made up of a tangle of groups the like of which cannot be found anywhere. Thus the apparent originality of individuals does not contradict the thesis of a total subordination of thought to social opinion.

This is Marx's own thesis. The only difference between him and Plato on this subject is that he is unaware of the possibility of exceptions occurring through the supernatural intervention of grace. This lacuna leaves completely intact the truth of one part of his research, but is the reason the rest is just verbiage.

318 Marx sought to elaborate the mechanism of social opinion. The phenomenon of professional morality supplied him with the key to it. Each professional group creates its own morality by virtue of which the conduct of the profession, provided it does not encroach on the rules, is beyond the reach

9 The original manuscript page ends here and on the back of it Weil wrote "La notion de patrie" (The concept of homeland) capitalised, centred and underlined with a thin line. The rest was blank.

of evil. This need is almost vital, for the stress of work, whatever that work might be, is in itself so great that it would be unbearable if it were mingled with the wearying concern about good and evil. To protect oneself from this, armour is necessary. The morality in use in the profession plays this role.

For example, a doctor who is given the care of a prisoner condemned to death will not generally ask himself the extremely distressing question of whether it is good to heal him. It is accepted that a doctor tries to heal. Even the slaves in Rome had a morality for their use, according to which a slave can never do wrong if he obeys his master or acts in his interests. Needless to say, this morality was promulgated by the masters; but it was also to a large extent adopted by the slaves, which is why revolts by slaves were rare, considering their numbers and their dreadful predicament. In the times when war was a profession, men at war had a morality according to which every act of war in conformance with the customs of war and useful to victory is lawful and right; including, for example, rape of women or murder of children during the sacking of cities, since the licence granted to soldiers on these occasions was indispensable to the morale of the army. Corresponding to commerce there is a morality where theft is the crime par excellence and in which any favourable exchange of an object for money is lawful and right. The character common to all these moralities, and to every kind of social morality, was expressed by Plato in a definitive formulation, "They call necessary things just and fine, for they are ignorant of how great is the distance in reality which separates the nature of the necessary from that of the good."[10]

Marx's conception is that the moral |*social*| atmosphere of a given society, an atmosphere that penetrates everywhere and combines with the particular morality of each milieu, is itself composed of a mixture of group moralities, in a proportion that exactly reflects the amount of power exercised by each group. Thus depending on whether a society is dominated by owners of vast agricultural enterprises, the military, merchants, industrialists, bankers, or bureaucrats, it will be completely infused with the conception of the world tied to the professional morality of the owners, the military, and so on. This 319
conception of the world will express itself everywhere, in the politics, in the laws, even in the abstract and seemingly disinterested speculations of intellectuals. Everyone will be subjected to it, but no one will be aware of this,

10 *Republic* 493c.

since everyone will believe that it is a matter not of a particular conception, but of a way of thinking inherent in human nature.

All this is in large part true and easy to verify. To cite just one example, it is strange to see the place theft has in the French penal code. Given certain aggravating circumstances, it is more severely punished than the rape of children. Yet the men who made this code did not only have money, but also children whom they no doubt loved; had they to choose between losing part of their fortune and seeing their children defiled, nothing justifies assuming they would have preferred the money. But in drafting the code they were, without knowing it, only organs of social reflexes; and in a society based on commerce, theft is the anti-social act par excellence. Whereas the trade in women, for example, is a species of commerce; hence it was with difficulty and rather unconvincingly decided to punish it.

So many facts however seem to contradict the theory that it would be refuted as soon as examined, were it not necessary to modify it by taking time into account. Man is a conservative being, and the past has a tendency to persist through its own weight. For example, a large part of the code dates from a time when commerce was far more important than today; thus, generally speaking, the moral atmosphere of a society contains elements that come from former ruling classes, who subsequently disappeared or more or less faded away. But the reverse is true also. Just as a leader of the opposition, destined to become prime minister, already has a base of supporters, so a class that is relatively weak, but destined soon to rule, already has at hand an outline of the trend of ideas that will rule with them and through them. This is how Marx explained the socialism of his time, including the phenomenon of Marx. He saw himself like the swallow whose very presence announces the imminent Spring, that is to say the revolution. He was his own portent.

The second step in his attempt at explanation consisted in looking for the mechanism of social power. This part of his thought is extremely weak.
320 He thought he could assert that the relations of power in a given society, if one abstracts away traces of the past, depend entirely on the technological conditions of production. Given these conditions, a society has the structure that enables maximum production. In trying always to produce more, it improves the conditions of production. In this way these conditions change. There comes a point when a break in continuity occurs, as when water, being gradually heated, comes suddenly to the boil. The new conditions make a new structure necessary. A real change in power occurs, followed,

after a while and under circumstances more or less violent, by corresponding political, judicial, and ideological change. When the circumstances are violent, one calls it a revolution.

There is a sound thought here but, by a strange irony, in complete contradiction with Marx's political position. It is that a visible revolution does not ever occur except as a ratification of an already completed invisible revolution. When a social stratum loudly seizes power, that is because it was already silently in possession of it, at least to a very large extent; otherwise it would not have the strength necessary for seizing it. That is obvious, once one views society as being ruled by power relations. This is fully confirmed by the French Revolution which, as Marx himself has shown, officially delivered to the bourgeoisie the power that it already in fact possessed since at least Louis XIV. It is also verified by the recent revolutions which, in several countries, have placed the totality of national life under the power of the state. Even prior to this, the state was much, close to being all.

The obvious consequence, it seems, for a partisan of the workers' revolution, is that before launching the workers into the adventure of a political revolution, one must find out whether there exist means likely to lead them to seize silently, gradually, almost invisibly, a large part of the real social power; and that one must either use these means if they exist, or abandon the workers' revolution if they do not exist. But however obvious this consequence, Marx did not see it, and that because he could not see it without losing what was for him his reason for living. For the same reason, his disciples, whether reformists or revolutionaries, were unlikely to see it. This is why one can say, without fear of exaggerating, that as a theory of workers' revolution Marxism is a nonentity.

| The rest of his theory of social transformations relies on two nonsense ideas. The first consists 321
in taking as a principle of social explanation Lamarck's principle, the "function creates the organ," that principle whereby the giraffe has tried so hard to eat bananas that its neck got longer |

The rest of his theory of social transformations relies on several nonsense ideas. The first consists in adopting for human history Lamarck's explanatory principle, "the function creates the organ"; that principle according to which the giraffe would have tried so hard to eat bananas that its neck would have lengthened. This is the kind of explanation which, without containing even a preliminary indication of the solution to a problem, gives the false impression that the problem is resolved, and thus prevents it from being posed. The problem is to know how the organs of animals come to be

adapted to their needs; by giving as answer the supposition of an inherent, adaptive tendency in animal life, one stumbles into the mistake that Molière ridiculed forevermore concerning the inherent, dormitive power of opium.

Darwin clarified the problem through the simple and brilliant idea of conditions of existence. It is surprising that there should be animals on earth. But once they are there, it is not surprising that there should be a correspondence between their organs and the necessities of their life, since otherwise they would not go on living. There is no chance of ever discovering in some corner of the world an exclusively banana-eating species, which however some unfortunate structural defect inhibits from eating bananas.

Here is one of those obvious facts so obvious that no one sees it, until an inspired intuition makes it manifest. In fact, this one had been recognised by the Greeks, as is the case for |*most of our*| almost all our ideas; but it was subsequently forgotten. Darwin was a contemporary of Marx. But Marx, like all followers of scientism, was far behind in matters of science. He believed he was doing scientific work by purely and simply transferring Lamarck's naiveties to the social domain.

He even added an additional degree of arbitrariness by assuming that the function creates not only an organ capable of fulfilling the function, but further, roughly, by and large, the organ capable of fulfilling it with the highest level of efficiency. His sociology is founded on postulates which, when subjected to reasoned examination, turn out to be unfounded, and which, when compared |*to experience*| to the facts, are manifestly false.

322 He supposes first that, for any given technological conditions of production, society has the structure capable of utilising them to their maximum. Why? By virtue of what necessity would things happen such that the production capacity would be utilised to its maximum? In fact no one |*knows what this is*| has any idea of what any such maximum might be. It is only clear that there has always been a lot of waste in all societies. But this idea from Marx is based on notions so vague that one cannot even show it to be false, for want of being able to grasp it.

In the second place, society would continually strive to improve production. This is the postulate of liberal economists, transferred from the individual to the society. This can be accepted with some reservations; but as a matter of fact there have been many societies where for centuries people only cared to live as their fathers lived.

In the third place, this striving would have an effect on the very conditions of production, and always in such a way as to improve them. If one considers

this assertion, one sees it to be arbitrary; if one compares it to the facts, one sees it to be false. There is no reason why trying to make the conditions of production better should always improve them. They can just as well be diminished. This happens very often. It is the case for example with a mine or a field. The same phenomenon arises from time to time, on a grand scale, and causes major crises. It is the story of the hen and the golden eggs. Aesop knew much more about this than Marx.

In the fourth place, when this improvement has passed a certain point, the social structure, which previously was the most efficient from the perspective of production, is no longer so; and from this fact alone, according to Marx, it necessarily follows that society abandons this structure and will adopt another which is the |*best possible*| most efficient possible.

All this is the height of arbitrariness. It does not stand up to a minute of careful examination. Surely, of all the men who have taken part in political, social, or economic changes in centuries past, none has said to himself, "I am going to induce a change in the social structure so that the present production capacity might be utilised to its maximum." Nor does one see the least sign of an automatic mechanism that would arise from the laws of social necessity and initiate a transformation whenever the production capacity was not fully used. Neither Marx nor the Marxists have ever pro- 323
vided the least indication in this direction.

Must it be therefore supposed that there is behind human history an all-powerful mind, a wisdom that watches over the course of events and directs it?[11] Marx would then be admitting, without saying, the truth that Plato knew. There is no other way to make sense of his conception. But it remains bizarre all the same. Why would this hidden mind watch over the interests of production? The mind is that which tends toward the good. Production is not |*the only necessity*| the good. The industrialists of the 19th century were alone in being confused on this point. The hidden mind which directs the destinies of humankind is not however the mind of a 19th century industrialist.

The explanation is that the 19th century was obsessed with production and above all with the advancement of production, and that Marx was subject

11 The French 'esprit' is most naturally translated as 'mind' and it is so translated here, though one could use 'spirit' instead. However, Weil is here alluding to the Hegelian roots of Marxist thought, particularly as Marx drew them from Hegel's 1807 *Phänomenologie des Geistes* whose title is translated in English sometimes as the *The Phenomenology of Mind* and sometimes as *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

slavishly to the influence of his time. This influence made him forget that production is not the good. He also forgot that it is not the only necessity, which is the cause of another nonsense idea; the belief that production is the sole factor in power relations. Marx purely and simply forgets war. It was the same for most of his contemporaries. The people of the 19th century, while gorging on Béranger's songs and Épinal prints in praise of Napoleon, had almost forgotten the existence of war. Marx did once think to indicate briefly that the modus operandi of war depends on the conditions of production; but he did not see the reciprocal relation by which the conditions of production are subject to the modus operandi of war. Man can be threatened with death, whether by nature or by his fellow man, and power in the end comes down to the threat of death. When considering power relations, it is always necessary to conceive power under its double aspect, need and arms.

A consequence of this oversight on Marx's part has been, in Marxist circles, a ridiculous confusion in the face of war and the problems related to war and peace. There is strictly nothing, within what is called Marxist doctrine, that indicates the attitude a Marxist should take in regard to these problems. For a time like ours, this is a serious deficiency.

The only form of war of which Marx takes account is overt or covert social war under the name of class struggle. He even makes it the sole principle of historical explanation. As, on the other hand, the development in production
324 is also the sole principle of historical development, it must be supposed that these two phenomena are but one. But Marx does not say how one is reduced to the other. Certainly the oppressed who revolt or the lower classes who want to be higher are never thinking about increasing the production capacity of society. The only connection one could conceive is that the permanent protest of men against the social hierarchy maintains the society in the requisite state of fluidity for the forces of production to be able to mould it as they might.

In this case the struggle of the classes is not an active principle, but only a negative condition. The active principle remains this mysterious mind that watches over maintaining production at maximum level, and which the Marxists sometimes call, in the plural, productive forces. They take this mythology very seriously. Trotsky wrote that the war of 1914 was in reality a revolt of productive forces against the limitations of the capitalist system. One can ponder such a formulation for some time, wondering what it means, before being forced to admit that it means nothing.

Besides, Marx was right to regard love of liberty and love of domination as the two impulses that continually stir social life. Only he forgot to show that a materialist principle of explanation is at work here. This is not obvious. Love of liberty and love of domination are two human facts that can be interpreted in several different ways.

In addition, these two facts have a much wider scope than the relation of oppressed to oppressor which alone held Marx's attention. One cannot make use of the concept of oppression without having made a serious effort to define it, for the concept is not clear. Marx did not bother to do this. The same men are oppressed in some respects, oppressors in others; or else may desire to become so, and this desire may prevail over the desire for liberty; and the oppressors, for their part, think much less often about keeping those beneath them obedient than about prevailing over their peers. The analogue is therefore not of a battle between two opposing camps, but rather of an extraordinarily complex tangle of guerrilla warfare. This tangle is nevertheless governed by laws. But they are to be discovered.

Marx's only real contribution to social science is to have postulated a need for one. That is a great deal; it is colossal; but we are still no further ahead. 325
We still need one. Marx did not even prepare for starting to develop it. His disciples even less so. In the term by which Marxism has designated itself, scientific socialism, the epithet scientific does not correspond to anything but a fiction. One would be tempted to say more bluntly, a lie; but Marx and the bulk of his disciples did not want to lie. If these men had not first duped themselves, one would have to characterise as a fraud the process by which they turned the respect men of today have for science to their exclusive benefit.

Marx was incapable of a real effort of scientific thought, because that did not interest him. This materialist was not interested in anything but justice. He was obsessed with it. His clear-eyed view of social necessity was of a kind to make him despair, since it is a necessity powerful enough to prevent men, not only from attaining, but even from conceiving justice. He was not willing to despair. He had an irresistible feeling deep within that man's desire for justice is too deep to be denied. He took refuge in a dream in which social matter itself takes care of the two functions that it forbids to man, namely not only achieving, but conceiving justice.

He labelled this dream dialectical materialism on this dream. This was enough to conceal it behind a veil. These two words are almost impenetrably empty.

A very amusing game, though somewhat cruel, is to ask a Marxist their meaning.

One can nevertheless find a kind of meaning for them by searching hard. Plato called dialectic the movement of the soul which, at each stage, in order to ascend to the higher domain, relies on the irreducible contradictions of the domain in which it finds itself. At the end of this ascent, it is in contact with the absolute good.

The image of contradiction in matter is one of the collision of forces, each one from a different direction. Marx has purely and simply attributed to social matter that movement towards the good via contradictions that Plato described as being the movement of the thinking creature drawn upwards by the supernatural operation of grace.

It is easy to see how he was led there. First of all, he wholeheartedly adopted the two false beliefs held so fervently by the bourgeois of his time. One is the confusion between production and the good, and consequently
326 between progress of production and progress towards the good; the other is the gratuitous generalisation which makes progress of production, so evident in the 19th century, the permanent law of human history.

Only, contrary to the bourgeois, Marx was not happy. The thought of misery unsettled him, as it does anyone who is not unfeeling. He needed, as compensation, something catastrophic, a stunning retribution, a punishment. He could not envisage progress as a continuous movement. He saw it as series of violent, explosive shocks. It is pointless to ask whether he or the bourgeois was right. The very idea of progress in favour in the 19th century does not make any sense.

The Greeks used the word dialectic when they were thinking of the virtue of contradiction as support to the soul drawn upwards by grace. Given that Marx in his turn was combining the material image of contradiction and the material image of the soul's salvation, namely the collisions between forces and the progress in production, he was perhaps right to use the word dialectic. But on the other hand, this word when coupled with the word materialism immediately reveals the absurdity. If Marx did not sense it, that is because he did not borrow the word from the Greeks but from Hegel, who was already using it without a precise meaning. As for the public, it was at no risk of being shocked; Greek thought no longer has enough life in it for that. The words were on the contrary very well chosen for leading people to say to themselves, "It must mean something."

When readers or listeners have been put into this state, they are very open to suggestion.

Formerly, in institutions of further education, workers would say sometimes, with a kind of timid avidity, to intellectuals who called themselves Marxists, "We would very much like to know what dialectical materialism is." It is not very likely that they were ever satisfied.

As to the mechanism of the automatic production of absolute good through social conflicts, the conception that Marx had of it is not difficult to grasp; all of it is rather perfunctory.

As the source of the social lie is located within groups struggling for domination or emancipation, the disappearance of these groups would abolish the lie, and man would live in justice and truth. And by what mechanism might these groups disappear? It is very simple. Every time a social transformation takes place, the dominant group falls, and a group lower relative to it takes its place. One has then only to generalise; all science and indeed all the 327
thought of the 19th century had this faulty practice of uncontrolled extrapolation; except in mathematics, the concept of limit was all but ignored. If every time a group placed lower down raises itself to dominance, a day will come when the lowest of all do so; after which there will be no more who are subordinate, no more oppression, no more social structure made of hostile groups, no more lies. Men will possess justice, and because they will possess it, they will know it for what it is.

This is how one should understand the passages where Marx seems completely to exclude the very ideas of justice, truth or good. As long as justice is absent, man cannot think it, let alone secure it; it can only come to him from outside. Given that society is tainted, poisoned, and that the social poison infiltrates all the thoughts of all men, all that men imagine under the name of justice is implicated in lies. Whoever talks of justice, truth, or whichever kind of moral value is lying or lets himself be duped by liars. How then to serve justice, if one does not know what it is? The only way, according to Marx, is to hasten the operation of that mechanism, inscribed in the very structure of social matter, that will automatically bring justice to men.

It is difficult really to determine whether Marx thought that the role of the proletariat in this mechanism, by placing them closer to the future society, was conveying it to them, to them and the writers or militants aligned with them, like a first glimpse of the truth; or whether he regarded the proletariat only as a blind instrument of that entity he called history. Probably his

thought oscillated on this point. But certainly he regarded the proletariat, including their allies and leaders coming from the outside, primarily as an instrument.

He regarded as just and good, not what appears as such to one of the minds warped by the social lie, but only whatever could hasten the appearance of a society without lies; in this domain, however, all that is effectual is, without exception, perfectly just and good, not in itself, but relative to the final goal.

Thus in the end Marx fell back into that group morality which repelled him to the point of making him hate society. Like the feudal lords of the past, like the businessmen of his own times, he had built for himself a morality that placed above good and evil the activity of the social group of which he was a part, that of the professional revolutionaries.

328 This always happens. The kind of failure that one dreads and hates most, of which one has the most horror, is always the one into which one falls if one looks for the source of the good where it is not. It is a trap perpetually laid for every man, against which there is only one protection.

That mechanism productive of paradise that Marx was imagining is obviously something childish.[12] Strength is a relation; those who are strong are so in relation to those who are weaker.[13] Those who are weak do not have the possibility of taking over social power; those who do take over social power by strength always form, even before this action, a group to which some mass of humanity is subject. Marx's revolutionary materialism consists in positing, on the one hand that everything is regulated exclusively through strength, on the other hand that a day will suddenly come when strength will be on the side of the weak. Not that some who were weak will become strong, a change that has always taken place; but that the entire mass of the weak, while remaining the mass of the weak, will have strength on its side.

If the absurdity is not plain to see, this is because it is thought that there is strength in numbers. But numbers are strength in the hands of the one who has them at his disposal. Not in the hands of those who comprise the

12 In her 1934 essay, "Reflections Concerning the Causes of Liberty and Social Oppression", Weil set out how Marx imagined that increasing levels of production would produce an abundance that reduced the effort involved to such an extent that the requirement for work would be negligible. This condition would be like the original, primeval paradise.

13 The French noun 'la force' is translated as 'strength' here to maintain the sense of material forces of varying strengths at work described in the earlier part of the essay.

numbers. Just as the energy locked within coal is a strength only after having passed through a steam engine, so the energy locked within a human mass is only a strength for a group external to the mass, one much smaller than it, and possessing set relations to it which, given the effort of very careful study, could perhaps be defined. |*Marx knew this law very well; he had studied it and set it out*| It follows from this that the strength of the masses is used for interests that are external to it, just as the strength of an ox is for the interest of the ploughman, or of a horse for the interest of the rider. Someone may push the rider off and take his place in the saddle, then be unseated in turn; this might be repeated a hundred or a thousand times; the horse will have to run under the spur all the same. And if the horse itself unseats the rider, another will soon take his place.

Marx knew all this very well; he set it out brilliantly with reference to the bourgeois state; but he wanted to forget it when it came to the revolution. He knew the masses are weak and only constitute a strength in the hands of another; for if it were otherwise there would never have been oppression. He allowed himself to be persuaded solely by a generalisation, the movement toward the limit of that continual changeover which periodically puts those 329
who were less strong in place of those who were stronger. The movement toward the limit, when it is applied to a relation one of whose terms is suppressed, is just too absurd. Yet this miserable reasoning was sufficient for Marx, because anything is sufficient to persuade someone who feels that, if he were not persuaded, he could not go on.

The idea that weakness itself, while remaining weak, could be strength, is not a new idea. It is the Christian idea itself, and the Cross is the illustration of it. But this involves a strength of an altogether different kind than that which is wielded by the strong; it is a strength that is not of this world, it is supernatural. It operates as the supernatural does, decisively, but secretly, silently and in the guise of the infinitely small; and if it penetrates the masses by irradiation, it does not stay in them, only in certain souls. Marx accepted this contradiction of a strong weakness without accepting the supernatural which alone renders the contradiction legitimate.

Likewise, Marx sensed a truth, an essential truth, when he understood that man can only |*possess*| conceive justice if he

[the remainder is missing]

Oeuvres complètes V:1

While this incomplete essay was written in 1943, Weil's concerns with the contradictions in Marxism dated to the 1930s. Superficially, this essay would seem unconnected to her other London writings. However, there is a connection: All these later writings address materialism regarding matter as a mode of underlying necessity. Here, Weil shows the folly of trying, as Marx did, to account for the spiritual without going beyond matter to the supernatural.

8

REFLECTIONS ON QUANTUM THEORY[1]

195

196 Two ideas have opened a chasm between what was understood as science since ancient Greece and what is understood today under that name; these are the ideas of relativity and quanta. The first has caused quite a stir with the general public; the name of the second is hardly known to them. Both date from the beginning of the century and were subversive in the same way, namely by introducing into science an accepted and assured contradiction.

Regarding relativity, the concern here is not with general relativity, which consists in extending to all possible motion the idea of relativity that classical mechanics applied only to linear and uniform motion; an idea certainly suitable to at least provide topics for extremely productive reflection. The concern is special relativity, seriously mis-named since it has hardly any relation to the idea of the relativity of motion. It is a very simple theory once one gives up trying to understand it. First, the work of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo and Newton led to attributing specific motions to the earth and to

1 Simone Weil added a footnote to the title to indicate it was a review of Max Planck, *Introduction to Physics* (Paris: Flammarion, 1941). She added, "One cannot help noting here some shortcomings in this edition: no dates are given, and the algebraic formulae in the notes are full of printing errors".

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various celestial bodies; second, a series of experiments culminated in a definite measurement of the speed of light; finally some experiments at the end of the 19th century made the speed of light look constant in all directions.[2] These results are contradictory; a finite speed cannot be constant in all directions if measured from within a system that is itself in motion in a particular direction. Nonetheless Einstein translated these mutually irreconcilable conclusions into algebraic formulae, combined the formulae as though they could be true at the same time, and derived some equations from them. It just so happens that in these equations the letter that represents time and each of the letters that correspond to the three spatial coordinates appear in a symmetrical way. The translation of these equations into ordinary language has produced paradoxes which have won Einstein a dubious renown, such as time being regarded as a fourth dimension.

The paradox of quanta is no less brutal, it is perhaps greater, though less striking at first sight; in addition, it is earlier. Quantum theory, whose first author was Planck, and which today still constitutes the principal preoccupation of physicists, addresses the central idea of science, the idea of energy. It consists in considering energy, or rather action, the product of energy and
197 time, as a magnitude that varies in a discontinuous manner, by successive jumps, and these jumps are what are called quanta. Yet the whole effort of science, since Galileo, has consisted in reducing all phenomena without exception to changes in the relationships between space and time, disallowing variable factors apart from distances, velocities and accelerations; space and time cannot be visualised other than as continuous magnitudes; and energy is precisely the idea by means of which everything is reduced to time and space. If I am two kilometres from somewhere and after walking find myself no more than one kilometre away, then whichever path I took, whichever detours I might have made, I have passed through all the intervening distances between two kilometres and one kilometre, with no exceptions. One can cast doubt on this proposition, as on any other, but it is impossible to visualise the contrary proposition. Now, science has to do with phenomena and as a result, unlike metaphysical or mystical thought, it lies on the level of visualisation, or immediately above; a scientific explanation that can in no way be visualised is devoid of meaning.

2 Weil is likely alluding to the Michelson–Morley experiment of 1887.

One can convince oneself by opening any textbook that the idea of energy derives from the idea of work and is reducible to it and that work is defined by the raising of a certain weight to a certain height. To say that there is a difference in energy between this or that state of a system is to say that one can visualise a transformation where a given system moves from one state to another and where, correlatively, this weight rises or descends to that height.

From the earliest study of mechanical phenomena, a constant was found that was defined by the conventional product of a force and a distance. Archimedes founded mechanics by demonstrating that a symmetrical scales remains in equilibrium if, one varies the weight on one side of the fulcrum while changing its position, provided the product of the weight and the distance from the fulcrum remain constant. Galileo showed that when a ball is successively released from the same height on planes of different gradients, the product of the distance it travels and the force pushing it is the same every time. He posited as a general law of equilibrium that when two bodies, each subject to a force, are held at rest by their mutual connection, the respective products of the force and the distance that would be travelled without this connection are equal. He showed, as did Descartes after him, that such a prod- 198
uct is also the key to simple machines, which, although they spare men toil, never, under any circumstances, alter the product of the force to be overcome and the displacement to be accomplished. Indeed a scales, as a form of lever, is a simple machine, as is the inclined plane when a weight is moved up it.

Later, the same product was used as the key to all the phenomena of dynamics, under the name kinetic energy or living force.[3] The formula for motion uniformly accelerated or retarded shows that when a ball, rolling at a uniform velocity on a horizontal plane, encounters an inclined plane and rises to a certain height, the work thus done, that is to say the product of this height and the weight of the ball, is equal to half the product of its mass and the square of the velocity with which it was rolling on the horizontal plane. Thus the kinetic energy of a body in motion, in other words this half-product, is the work that this body can do, in certain conditions, owing only to its velocity. Potential energy is the work that a body can do, owing only to its position, by means of an infinitely small impetus, as when a ball is lying on a table; the theorem of the conservation of energy posits that, in a purely mechanical system, the sum of the kinetic energy and the potential energy

3 "Living force" from the Latin *vis viva*.

remains constant as long as no work is done upon this system by something external to it, or by this system upon something external.

The great idea of the 19th century was to assimilate instances of work, using numerical equivalences, to changes other than movement. Joule began it. If from a height of one metre one drops a weight of one kilogram which while falling turns, by means of a pulley, a small paddle wheel in a container filled with water, then the temperature of the water rises; the thermal energy that produces this rise in temperature is equal to one kilogram-metre. Joule confirmed that several different mechanical methods always allow, by means of the same amount of mechanical energy, raising the same mass of water from 0° to 1°. After many analogous experiments, the scientists of the 19th century posited that in all phenomena there is an increase or decrease in energy equivalent to mechanical energy; this principle finds a great number of successful applications in the study of chemical and electrical phenomena. The fundamental principle of science in the 19th century is that one must be able, with regard to
199 any phenomenon, to visualise at least theoretically either the production of this phenomenon by means of moving a weight or moving a weight by means of this phenomenon. The word energy has no other meaning, which is why every kind of energy is measured in ergs, a unit defined by the raising of a weight.

A weight cannot be first at this height, then at another, without passing through all the intervening heights, without any exceptions. Distance is a continuous magnitude; no geometry, not even non-Euclidean, represents it otherwise. Time which for physicists is envisaged as uniform movement, that is to say distance, is a continuous magnitude. It is the same for velocity, the relation of distance to time, and for acceleration, the relation of velocity to time. In no definition of mechanical energy do any magnitudes enter other than distance, velocity, and acceleration, combined with mass; action is a product of energy and time. Non-mechanical energy is that which, in all non-mechanical phenomena, is posited as equivalent to mechanical energy. It is therefore easy to feel just how extraordinary it is to talk of quanta of energy or action.

The oddest thing is that, while Planck asserted, "Matter can only emit radiant energy in finite quantities proportional to the frequency," he was not led to this proposition by the study of microscopic phenomena where experiment permits measuring some thresholds, but by the study of a macroscopic phenomenon, black body radiation.[4]

4 The editors of the *Oeuvres complètes* suggest that Weil took this quotation from a book in her possession by Louis de Broglie, viz. *La Physique nouvelle et les quanta* [*The New Physics and Quanta*] (Paris: Flammarion, 1937).

The idea of irreversibility had been introduced into the concept of energy by the second law of thermodynamics, Clausius' principle, known as the principle of energy degradation. This idea had led to that of probability through the simple idea that a passage from a more probable state to a less probable state is practically irreversible; if someone sweeps their hand across printing-press type that was forming a verse of Valéry, they will put the type into disarray, and if someone sweeps across the type with their hand again many more times, this will not re-form a verse of Valéry. The physicist Boltzmann, Planck's contemporary, had thus interpreted irreversible phenomena as the transformation of mechanical energy into thermal energy through friction. Planck tried to reconstruct the phenomenon known as black body radiation in a way that matched the experimental data by using probabilities. It was in the formulae for these probabilities that he found discontinuity; he introduced discontinuity into energy because these probabilities are functions of energy. 200

One cannot help wondering whether he could not have done otherwise. The experiment was certainly not constraining him; since as the measurements were not microscopic, they could not provide thresholds, but only data points between which one had to interpolate. One is always free to interpolate by means of either discontinuous or continuous functions. It seems therefore that Planck could have found functions other than those strictly speaking required by classical mechanics, since these disagreed with the experiment, but still continuous functions.[5] One is tempted to wonder whether it was not the very nature of the calculation of probability, whose starting point is the game of dice, and hence of numerical relations, that led Planck to introduce whole numbers into his formulae. This would admittedly be a very strange origin for such a great revolution. In any case he introduced discontinuity into energy, in relation to the specific case of black body radiation, for ease of calculation. His innovation had stupendous success, since it was subsequently accepted that his formulae are valid for all exchanges of energy that take place among atoms and radiation, that is to say everywhere. Thus the word energy no longer has any relation to weights and distances, or to masses and velocities; but neither does it have a relation to something else, since no other definition of energy has been developed;

5 Weil's brother, André, noted subsequently that his sister was mistaken in suggesting that continuous functions for probabilities would provide the solution she thinks and that she had misunderstood, at the very least, Planck's understanding of how to deal with probability using continuous functions. See OC VII:1, 496n1.

it has no relation to anything. That does not hinder one from continuing to speak of kinetic energy. Everything, as they say, is possible on paper.

It is the different role of algebra that creates the chasm separating the science of the 20th century from that of prior centuries. Algebra in physics was at first merely a procedure for summarising the relations between physical concepts established through reasoning based on experience; an extremely convenient procedure when it comes to the numerical calculations necessary for verifications and applications. But the role of algebra has not stopped growing in importance; in the end, where previously algebra constituted the auxiliary language and words the essential language, today it is exactly the opposite. Some physicists tend even to make algebra the only, or almost the only, language, so that at the limit, a limit of course impossible to reach, there would no longer be anything but numbers derived from experimental measurements and letters combined in formulae. However, ordinary lan-
201 guage and algebraic language do not come with the same logical requirements; the relations between concepts are not entirely reflected by the relations between letters; in particular, incompatible statements can have as their equivalents equations that are not at all incompatible. When, after having translated the relations between concepts into algebra, one manipulates the formulae by taking account of solely the numerical data of the experiment and the laws specific to algebra, one can obtain results which, once translated back into spoken language, violently clash with common sense.

This results in an impression of great profundity; for profound philosophical or mystical meditations also involve contradictions, oddities and an insurmountable difficulty in verbal expression. Yet in the case of algebra, it is a matter of something completely different. If a profound thought is inexpressible, it is because it simultaneously encompasses several vertically overlaid relations and because common language mirrors differences of level badly; but algebra is even less well-suited for this, since it puts everything on the same plane. Proofs, observations, hypotheses, almost arbitrary conjectures, approximations, and views concerning adequacy, convenience and probability, all these things, once translated into letters, play the same role in equations. If the algebra of physicists produces the same effects as profundity, it is only because it is completely flat; the third dimension of thought is absent from it.

This false profundity has some rather amusing effects, some of which would delight Rabelais or Molière. For philosophers, filled with respectful zeal, are exhausting themselves interpreting that which they cannot

comprehend and translating the equations into philosophy; in general, popular commentators and even some scientists look with a touching perseverance for the profound meaning, for the conception of the world contained in contemporary science. Quite in vain, since there is none. Science resembles in this respect the emperor in the tale by Andersen; two artisans promised him clothing made of a fabric invisible to fools, with the result that he walked naked in the streets of his capital while neither he nor any of the spectators dared to acknowledge that he was naked. Any somewhat educated man would be afraid to look a fool by confessing to others or to himself that he is unable to discern the least philosophical significance associated with the innovations of contemporary science; he prefers to invent one for them, necessarily rather nebulous. The last book by Planck, translated into French 202
under the title *Introduction to Physics*, a book more than three quarters full of philosophical considerations, has provided a new illustration of Andersen's story.[6] Indeed some critics, on the strength of the author's scientific renown, have believed that they saw a profound thought in this book; they offered some quotations in support of their judgement, and these quotations were commonplaces of a rare platitudinousness.

If one disregarded the standing of the author, this book would be in truth, save a few pages, almost devoid of interest. Everything in it that relates to philosophy generally, God, the human soul, freedom, knowledge, and the existence of the external world, is rather mediocre, generally sensible, but banal, vague and superficial. It shows clearly that Planck was not a great mind. It also shows, which is rather amusing, that this author, responsible for so great a revolution, was not only a very decent man, but also what is called a right-thinking man, very attached to religion and to all that is traditionally an object of respect. But the really valuable pages of this book are those in which Planck makes, naïvely and without thinking about it, some confessions that provide singular insight into the mysterious process of progress in science; they completely destroy the commonplace, often repeated emphatically by Planck himself, according to which science is something universal floating above scientists for all time and all countries.

6 Planck's book was entitled *Wege zur Physikalischen Erkenntnis*, and appeared in German in 1934. A version censored to exclude Einstein appeared in French in 1941 under the title *Initiations à la physique*, and it is to this edition that Weil had access in copying the quotations that follow.

Here are some extracts from these pages, "Contrary to what is so readily claimed in some physics circles, it is not correct that in the development of a hypothesis one can only use concepts whose significance can be defined through measurement, independently of any theory. [. . .] There is absolutely no magnitude which can be measured directly. A measurement, on the contrary, only gets its significance in physics by virtue of an interpretation that is the product of the theory. [. . .] Even in the case of the most direct and most exact measurements, for example those of weight or amperage, the results can only be used after being subjected to a number of corrections whose calculation is inferred from a hypothesis."

The following statements are even more revealing, "The creator of a hypothesis enjoys practically unlimited possibilities, he is as little bound by the functioning of his sense organs as he is by that of the instruments which he uses. [. . .] One might even say that he creates a geometry according to his
203 fancy. With instruments of ideal exactitude [. . .] he can carry out in thought the most delicate measurements and from their results draw the most general conclusions; these conclusions do not have, at least not directly, anything to do with real measurements. This is also why measurements will never be able to confirm nor disconfirm a hypothesis directly; they will only be able to indicate greater or lesser adequacy."

But here is the best one, "The great scientific ideas do not usually conquer the world because their adversaries end up adopting them little by little and they end up being convinced of their truth. [. . .] What happens most often is that the adversaries of a new idea end up dying and the rising generation is acclimated to it." Thus scientific theories disappear in the manner of men's fashions of the 17th century; the clothing style of Louis XIII disappeared when the last old men who had been young under Louis XIII had died.

No one who has duly reflected on these statements would ever say, "Science states that . . ." Science is mute; it is the scientists who talk. What they say is of course not independent of the times since, as Planck admitted, the supporters of this or that point of view fall silent at the precise moment when death imposes silence on them. As for location, it is true that scientists belong to various countries. But travel, correspondence, and communications are nowadays so easy and so quick during peace-time that scientists in the same field, though dispersed across the globe, constitute a tiny village, where everyone knows everyone else, where one is privy to everyone else's private life, where anecdotes that would be called gossip anywhere else

endlessly circulate. In the towns where several of them live, they see each other constantly, unless they have fallen out, and even their wives hardly see anyone but each other. This village is closed; one does not enter it from the outside. Even if one had studied the writings of scientists for twenty years, when one is oneself not a scientist by profession, then one is a layman with regard to science; and the opinions of laymen count for nothing in the village, nobody will pay the least attention to them, except occasionally to borrow some turns of phrase that are pleasing and flattering. An educated reader, an artist, a philosopher, a peasant, or a Polynesian are all outside of science to the same extent, that is to say absolutely, and this is so even for scientists outside any field other than their own.

One rarely leaves the village; many scientists, outside their field, are lim- 204
ited and unsophisticated, or, if they are interested in something outside their scientific work, it is very rare for them to relate that interest, in their minds, to the interest they have in science. The inhabitants of the village are studious, brilliant, and exceptionally gifted; but for all that, until the age when the mind and the character are for the most part formed, they are at school like the rest and are nourished with mediocre textbooks. Never has anyone set out specifically to develop them to think critically. At no point in their life does anyone specifically prepare them to place the pure love of truth above other motives; no process of elimination makes a natural disposition in this direction a condition for entry into the village. There are processes of elimination, among them examinations and competitions, but they do not focus on the intensity or the purity of love for the truth. This love, the taste for exactitude and for work well-done, and the desire to be talked about, lust for money, recognition, reputation, honours and titles, and antipathies, jealousies, and friendships, all these motives and more still are mixed together among the inhabitants of the village, as among all people, in varying proportions. This village, like all other villages, is made of average humanity, with some upward and downward deviations. It has some singular features; the fact of being periodically turned upside down by changes in fashion is one such; every ten years or so a new generation gets excited about new opinions. Like elsewhere, the strife between generations and between people produces at every moment a balance of opinion. The state of science at a given moment is nothing other than that; it is the balance of opinion in the village of scientists. This opinion, it is true, is based on experiments, but it is always a matter of experiments carried out within that village, without external

oversight, with costly and complicated devices that are only found there; experiments prepared, repeated, corrected by the village inhabitants alone, and above all interpreted only by them, and this with a liberty of which Planck's remarks quoted above give the measure. It is therefore not true that science is a species of supernatural oracle, a source of pronouncements which are, admittedly, different from year to year, but necessarily increasingly wise. For this is how it is commonly envisaged today, and the exhilaration we feel in proclaiming, "Science says that . . ." is not even tempered
205 by the certainty that science will no longer say that in five years' time. One would think—in this context as in several others—that the present moment has for us the validity of eternity. Valéry himself has more than once spoken of science in line with common superstition. As for the scientists, they are, of course, the first to pass off their own opinions as judgements emanating from an oracle, for which they should not be responsible, for which they should not be held accountable. This pretence is intolerable, because it is not legitimate. There is no oracle, but only the opinions of scientists, who themselves are men. They maintain what they believe they have to maintain, which they are right to do, but they are themselves the authors responsible for all they maintain, and they have to account for it. They do not give this account; however they are wrong in this; they wrong themselves for a start, since they do not give it to themselves either.

They have to account above all for their break with classical science. Not that this is a calamity. Classical science, at its summit and claiming to be capable of explaining everything without exception, had become intellectually suffocating, which is why Bergson, Einstein, and all those who forced holes into this sealed system have been hailed as liberators. Moreover the primary concepts of classical science, inertia, uniform movement, force, acceleration, kinetic energy, and work are obscure as soon as they are considered attentively. Is it not odd that uniform linear movement, the simplest of all movements according to the principle of inertia, can only be measured, with respect to time, through the diurnal movement of the stars, that is to say, a circular movement; and cannot be represented except through the example of a ball rolling on a plane, a movement which contains rotation? Is it not odd that this movement, which takes place without the intervention of any force, contains energy? Is it not strange that the concept of work, borrowed from human experience, should be defined in such a way that a man who carries fifty kilograms over ten kilometres is not doing any work? And that

when two identical bodies pass through the same linear distance in the same time, there is work in one case and not in the other, if the movement of the one is uniform and that of the other is not? Plenty more oddities could be found.

But what is more serious is that classical science claimed to resolve the contradictions, or rather the correlations of opposites, that make up part of 206
the human condition and from which man is not allowed to free himself. It believed it could achieve this by suppressing one of the terms. For example, the continuous and the discontinuous are for us givens; we think in space and of number; we cannot get from one side of a river to the other without crossing it, and we know of nothing intermediate between iron and gold. Classical physics tried to suppress the discontinuous; it was inevitable that there would be a clash, and this in its very centre, in its principal branch, in the study of the very concept of energy which was to be used for this suppression, in other words, in thermodynamics. We envisage clearly only transformations capable of being repeated in the reverse direction, and at the same time we are subject to a time whose course is irretrievable; we age, we die, ashes do not become wood, rust does not become iron, and more generally things which are easily and quickly destroyed are either impossible or difficult and protracted to reconstruct or replace. The attempt to explain a world made in this way by a world of atoms subject to mechanical energy alone, energy involving no irreversibility, should have been impossible. Classical science tried to take account only of blind necessity and to abolish completely the idea of order; the latter reappeared under the guise of probability which Boltzmann made use of to move from reversible to irreversible; since on close inspection, one cannot define low probability except through an order. Classical science tried to retain only the first of the double relationship that subordinates the whole to the parts and the parts to the whole, the second seeming, like the notion of order, to be tainted by teleology; yet nowadays mathematics, physics and biology are turning towards the study of wholes considered as such. In themselves these changes are fortunate, since the hopes of classical science were at once absurd and impious. Absurd, because one cannot reasonably hope to give an account of a world in which we find correlated opposites through the suppression of one of the two terms; even if the other term is regarded as an illusion, one must still give an account of this illusion, and one cannot do this by means of the opposite term; of those ideas that are givens for man, man cannot

eliminate any of them, he can only make room for them. Impious, because man on this earth is not permitted to free himself from contradictions, but only to make good use of them; as Plato knew, all that human intelligence
207 can represent to itself contains contradictions that are the lever by which it elevates itself above its natural domain.

What is a calamity is not the abandonment of classical science, but the manner in which it was abandoned. It mistakenly believed itself capable of unlimited progress; it ran up against its limits around 1900; the scientists, instead of stopping along with it so as to consider these limits, to reflect upon them, to try to describe them, define them, give an account of them, and draw from them insights into the whole, went past them in a mad rush, leaving classical science behind them. Is it surprising? Are they not paid to be always moving forward? One does not gain advancement, reputation, or a Nobel prize by standing still. For a brilliantly gifted scientist to stop voluntarily, he would need a sort of saintliness or heroism; and why would he be a saint or a hero? Men in other professions, with rare exceptions, are not one either. Scientists have thus forged ahead, without revising anything, since any revision would have seemed like a step backwards; they have made only some additions. When they ran up against the discontinuous, they still did not give up on reducing everything to variations in energy; they simply put the discontinuity into energy itself, thereby stripping it of all meaning, but they nonetheless continued to put it at the centre of all research, under the influence of the momentum acquired in previous centuries. The difficulty of using the idea of probability to establish a bridge between the world which is given to us and the hypothetical and purely mechanical world of atoms did not embarrass them; the consequences of quantum theory, which has its roots in the study of probability, led them to lodge probability among the atoms themselves. Consequently trajectories of atomic particles are no longer necessary but probable, and necessity is nowhere to be found. Yet probability cannot be defined except as a rigorous necessity in which some conditions are known and others unknown; the idea of probability, detached from that of necessity, has no meaning. Probability thus detached is no more than a summary of statistics, and statistics itself is not justified by anything, except practical utility; a thousand facts make it right against one fact by some kind of transposition from voting or a plebiscite. That leaves nothing left but brute experience, even though science, like all effort of thought, consists in interpreting experience. Moreover never has so much been interpreted as today;

never have so many hypotheses been made; never has it been permitted to make them with such licence.

As strange as the expression of such uncertainty might seem today, it is 208
doubtful that scientists can long continue moving forward under such conditions. For they have almost nothing left controlling them in the steps they take in their thinking. They have little more than algebra, which controls them only as a simple tool does which one adapts to so as to use it, and it is a very elastic tool. It is a mistake to think that experience can be used for this purpose, for every human thought, including those beliefs which seem most absurd to us, has experience as its object and finds a basis and a confirmation in experience. The prestige of magicians relies on experience; a belief which is not experientially verified is not viable in any human milieu. All thinking is an effort of interpretation of experience, interpretation for which experience provides neither model, nor rule, nor criterion; one finds the givens of problems there, but not the manner of resolving them nor even of formulating them. This effort, like all others, needs to be oriented towards something; all human effort is oriented; if man is not going somewhere, he remains motionless. He cannot do without values. In any theoretical study, the value has the name truth. Men made of flesh, on this earth, probably cannot have a representation of truth that would not be defective; but they need one; an imperfect image of unrepresentable truth that we have seen, as Plato says, on the other side of the sky.[7] The scientists of the classical period had a representation of scientific truth, admittedly very defective, but they had one; whereas those of today do not have anything in mind, however vague, remote, arbitrary and impossible, towards which they can turn and call it truth. Even less, therefore, do they have the image of a route that would lead them to it and to which they could refer for controlling each step in their thinking. They are still carried along by the impetus of previous generations, and follow directions through momentum that today no longer answer to anything; but this impetus will run out. Licence is an intoxicating thing, and we have got drunk on it in all domains, but absolute licence stops one far more surely than any chain. It is therefore to be foreseen that some time fairly soon, perhaps two or three generations, perhaps sooner, the scientists will come to a stop.

7 *Phaedrus* 247b-c.

It is to be foreseen, not feared. Why should we wish science unimpeded progress? We have no great good to hope for from the development of tech-
209 nology, so long as we do not know how to prevent men from using technology for the domination of their fellows rather than matter; as for our knowledge, scientific progress cannot add to it, since it is recognised today that laymen can understand nothing about science, and that even scientists are laymen outside their specialist field. A forced stop would perhaps compel scientists to do some work of recapitulation and revision, to develop, following the immortal model left by Archimedes, an axiomatisation of physical chemistry; not to fabricate an artificial coherence, but to make an honest accounting of the axioms, postulates, definitions, hypotheses and principles without omitting those that are implicit in experimental technique itself, for example in the use of a scales. Such work would perhaps turn science into knowledge, by making clear the difficulties, contradictions, and impossibilities that today one hastens to conceal under solutions behind which the intelligence can no longer discern anything. But this work should be started soon. Without it the standstill in science might cause, not a renewal, but the disappearance of the scientific spirit across the globe for several centuries, as happened after the Roman Empire had killed Greek science.

Something infinitely more precious than science itself is in jeopardy in this crisis; it is the idea of truth that the 18th century and above all the 19th has tied very closely to science; quite erroneously, but we have retained this habit. The disappearance of scientific truth has made truth itself vanish for us, accustomed as we are to take the one for the other. Once truth disappears, utility straightaway takes its place, for man always directs his effort towards some good. But such utility is something the intelligence lacks the qualities to define or to judge, it only has licence to serve it. Once the arbiter, the intelligence becomes the servant, and desires give it orders. In addition public opinion instead of conscience becomes sovereign mistress of thought, for man always submits his thoughts to a superior control, superior either in value or in power. That is where we are today. Everything is directed towards utility, without any thought given toward how to define it; public opinion reigns supreme in the village of scientists as much as in the great nations. It is as if we have returned to the time of Protagoras and the Sophists, the
210 time when the art of persuasion, of which slogans, advertising, propaganda through public meetings, newspapers, cinema, and radio constitute the modern equivalent, took the place of thought, ruled the fate of cities, and caused

coups d'état. This is why Book IX of Plato's *Republic* seems to describe the contemporary state of affairs. But today it is not Greece, but the terrestrial globe which is at stake. And we want for a Socrates, Plato, Eudoxus, the Pythagorean tradition and the teaching of the Mysteries. We have the Christian tradition, but it can do nothing for us as long as it has not come alive in us once more.

For a long time already, in every domain without exception, the titular guardians of spiritual values had left them to decay, by their own shortcomings and under no external compulsion. A kind of fear prevents us from recognising this, as if we were thereby risking an attack on these values themselves; far from it, in the perhaps very long period of pain and humiliation in which we are involved, we cannot one day recover what we are missing unless we feel within our whole soul the extent to which we have deserved our fate. We see the might of arms increasingly taking over the intelligence, and suffering today makes this subservience perceptible by all; but the intelligence had already lowered itself to a state of servitude before having anyone to obey. If someone offers himself as a slave on the market, is it any surprise he finds a master?

The tempest that surrounds us has uprooted our values, has unmade their hierarchy, and put them all in question so as to weigh them on the ever-false scales of might. As for us at least, let us also, during this time, each for himself, place them all in question, let us weigh them within ourselves in the silence of attention, and hope that it may be granted to us to turn our conscience into a true scales.

Émile Novis

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

Weil made ongoing efforts to keep up with developments in contemporary science and mathematics. The role that science played in European culture was a frequent topic in her essays. Her book review of *Introduction to Physics* by the German physicist and originator of quantum theory, Max Planck, embodies both of her interests. While written in November 1941, the review did not appear in *Cahiers du Sud* until December 1942 after Weil had departed Marseilles for New York.

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9

MORALITY AND LITERATURE

90

Nothing is beautiful, marvellous, perpetually new, perpetually surprising, and charged with a sweet and continuous intoxication like the good is. Nothing is barren, dismal, monotone, and boring like evil is. This is how it is for authentic good and evil. Fictional good and evil have the opposite relationship. Fictional good is boring and flat. Fictional evil is varied, interesting, engaging, profound, and full of seductions. 91

That is because within reality there is a necessity and an impossibility which are missing in fiction, just as the gravity which governs us is missing on the canvas of a painting. In the space that separates the sky from the earth, things fall easily, even inevitably, as soon as there is nothing under them; they do not go up, or else not much, with difficulty, and by artificial means. A man who, coming down a ladder, misses a rung and falls is a sight that is either sad or uninteresting even the first time one sees it. A man who walked in mid-air as if on a staircase and whom one saw going on this way as far as the clouds, before coming back down, could repeat this every day, every hour; never would one tire of seeing it. That is how it is with pure good. For a necessity as powerful as gravity condemns man to evil, blocking him from any good other than what is narrowly limited, arduously obtained and mixed and sullied throughout with evil; except when the supernatural appears on earth, which suspends the effects of terrestrial necessity. But if, on the canvas of a painting, I depict a man who is going up through the air, it is

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of no interest. That is something that has no interest unless it is real. Unreality strips all value from the good.

A man walking with a natural gait is something banal and without interest. Men who hop and leap about curiously will stop me, amusing me for a few minutes. But if I realise that each of them is barefoot on burning coals, the relationship changes. The hopping, the leaping, become terrible, unbearable to watch, and at the same time, in all its horror, boring and monotonous. The man who then walks in a natural way, my attention will be avidly drawn to and will linger there. In this way evil, as long as it is fictional, derives its interest from the variety of forms it assumes, which seems then to belong to an unbounded fantasy. The necessity inseparable from reality effaces that interest completely. The simpleness that makes fictional good a pale thing on which the gaze cannot linger is in real good unfathomable wonder.

Thus, given that literature is mainly made up of fiction, immorality seems inseparable from it. It is quite wrong to reproach writers for being immoral, unless one reproaches them at the same time for being writers, as people had the courage to do in the 17th century. Those who have pretensions to a
92 high morality are no less immoral than the others, but merely worse writers; for them as for the others, no matter what they do, in spite of themselves, good is boring and evil more or less engaging. One could on these grounds condemn the whole of literature en bloc. Why not? Impassioned writers and readers will cry out that immorality is not an aesthetic criterion. But they would have to prove, which they have never done, that only aesthetic criteria should be applied to literature. As readers do not constitute a distinct animal species, as those who read are the same as those who perform a number of other functions, it is impossible that literature should be exempted from the categories of good and evil to which all human activities are subject. Every activity has a dual relation to good and evil, in its execution and in its principle. Thus on the one hand a book can be realised well or badly, and on the other can proceed either from good or from evil.

But it is not only in literature that fiction is the creator of immorality. It is also so in life itself. For the substance of our life is almost exclusively fashioned from fiction. We narrate our future to ourselves. Short of an heroic love of truth, we narrate our past to our ourselves by refashioning it to our liking. We pay no heed to others; we narrate to ourselves what they think, what they say, what they do. Reality provides us with ingredients, just as novelists often take their plot from a news item, but we surround them with

a haze where values are inverted as in all fiction, where evil is engaging and good is boring. It is only when reality hits us hard enough to wake us up for an instant, for example through contact with a saint or by falling into the midst of affliction or crime, only in cases like these or those that are analogous do we sense for a minute the horrible monotony of evil or the unfathomable wonder of good. But we soon fall back into the half-sleep peopled with our idle chatter.

Yet something else has the power to awaken us to the truth. These are the works of writers of genius, of those at least whose genius is of the first rank and has reached complete maturity. They lie beyond fiction and draw us out of it. They give us in the form of fiction an equivalent to the very depth of reality, that density with which life presents us every day, but which we do not know how to grasp, because we find falsehoods pleasing.

Even though the works of these men are made of words, the gravity that 93
governs souls is present in them. It is present and manifest. Within souls, this gravity, although sometimes felt, is disguised by the very effects it produces; the submission to evil is always accompanied by error and falsehood. The man inexorably carried along the path of cruelty or fear cannot discern the nature of the force that propels him, nor the relations between this force and the whole set of external conditions. In words put together by genius, several paths are visible and tangible simultaneously, placed in their true relations, but the listener or reader is not drawn down any of them. He senses gravity as one senses it when one looks over a precipice while safe and not subject to vertigo. He discerns the unity and diversity of its forms within this architecture of the impenetrable deep. This is how, in the *Iliad*, the paths toward victory as well as toward defeat are manifest and perceptible simultaneously, which is never the case for a soldier engaged in fighting. The dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles, some of Shakespeare's plays, Racine's *Phèdre*, alone among French tragedies, several of Molière's comedies, and Villon's *The Testament* encapsulate this gravity that only genius can capture. Good and evil appear there in their truth. These poets had genius, and genius oriented towards the good. There are also demonic geniuses. They have their maturity too. But just as the maturity of genius is conformity to the true relation between good and evil, the work which corresponds to the maturity of demonic genius is silence. Rimbaud is its example and icon.

All the writers who are not possessed of a genius of the first rank in its full maturity have one sole raison d'être, to be a medium in which such genius

will one day appear. Only this function justifies their existence, which should otherwise be inhibited on account of the immorality to which they are condemned by the nature of things. To reproach a writer for his immorality is to reproach him for not having genius, or only second-rate genius, assuming that combination of words makes sense, or a genius as yet undeveloped. That he has no genius, is in one sense not his fault; in another sense it is his one sin. Seeking a remedy for the immorality of letters is a completely vain undertaking. Genius is the sole remedy and the source of it is beyond the reach of our endeavour.

But what can and should be corrected, in view of the very same consideration of this irremediable immorality, is the usurpation by writers of
94 a function of spiritual direction for which they are totally unsuited. Only geniuses of the first rank in their full maturity are capable of exercising it. As for other writers, unless they have a philosophical vocation in addition to the literary one, which is rare, their conception of the world and of life, their opinions about current problems, can have no interest of any kind, and it is ridiculous to call upon them to express them. This usurpation dates from the 18th century and especially from Romanticism. It introduced into literature a messianic self-conceit wholly contrary to the purity of art. Writers were formerly servants in grand households. This position came with often painful situations, but it was much more favourable than messianic illusion, not only for the moral health of the writers and the public, but also for the art itself.

This usurpation has had the gravest possible consequences only in the last half- or quarter-century, because only then did its influence penetrate all the way to the people. No doubt a bit of bad oral or written literature has always circulated among the people. But in the past it had its antidote in the perfectly beautiful things that bathed popular life, the religious ceremonies, prayers, songs, stories, and dances. And above all it had no authority. In the course of the last quarter-century, all of the authority tied to the position of spiritual direction usurped by the men of letters has moved down to the lowest publications. For there was a continuity between these publications and the highest literary production, and the public was aware of it. The self-same literary milieu where no one ever refused to shake hands with anyone contained those who were involved exclusively with these publications, and their occasional contributors, and our greatest names. Nowhere between a poem by Valéry and an advertisement for beauty cream promising a rich marriage to anyone using it could one find a break in the continuity. As a

result of the spiritual usurpation achieved by literature, an advertisement for beauty cream came to have in the eyes of little village girls the authority formerly attached to the words of priests. Is it any surprise we have fallen thus to where we have? To have allowed this is a crime for which all those who can handle a pen should bear the responsibility with remorse.

For centuries the function of spiritual direction had been exclusively in the hands of priests. They often performed it atrociously, as the pyres of the 95
Inquisition attest, but they at least had some title to it. In truth only the greatest of saints are capable of it, as are among writers only the greatest geniuses. But all priests, by profession, invoke the saints, take inspiration from them, try to follow and imitate them, and above all the one true saint, that is to say Christ; or if they do not do so, which in fact often happens, they are failing in their duty. Provided they do so, they can communicate more good than they themselves possess. A writer's work by contrast comes only from himself; he may be subject to the influence of various other writers, but not draw his inspiration from them.

When priests had in actual fact lost almost entirely this function of direction as a result of what was being called enlightenment in the 18th century, writers and scientists took their place. For one as for the other, the absurdity is the same. Mathematics, physics, and biology are as foreign to spiritual direction as is the art of putting words together. When literature and science usurp this function, then there is no longer a spiritual life. Today various signs seem to indicate that right now this usurpation by writers and scientists has come to an end, despite appearances. This should be something to rejoice in, were there not grounds to fear that they are being replaced by something much worse.

But the works of authentic geniuses from previous centuries remain. They are near at hand. Their contemplation is the inexhaustible source of an inspiration that can legitimately direct us. For this inspiration, for one who knows how to receive it, tends, in Plato's words, to make us grow wings against gravity.

Émile NOVIS

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

While working 150km north of Marseilles at the grape harvest in late September and October 1941, Weil conceived and wrote this article setting out the place of literature and writers in public morality. Weil believed that the first part of the 20th century was marked by an enervation in morals and in the concept of value. Published in 1944 by *Cahiers du Sud*, a Marseilles journal, it followed her letter to the editor concerning the responsibilities of literature.

10

ESSAY ON THE CONCEPT OF READING

This is an attempt to define a concept that has not yet received an adequate name, for which the name reading would perhaps be appropriate. There is a mystery in reading, a mystery the contemplation of which can probably help not to explain, but to grasp other mysteries in the life of men. 73

We all know that sensation is immediate, brute and takes us by surprise. A man receives, unexpectedly, a punch to the stomach; everything has changed for him before he knows what happened to him. I touch a burning hot object; I feel myself flinch before I know that I am burning myself. Something takes hold of me. That is how the universe treats me and I recognise it by this treatment. One is not surprised by the power that blows, burns, or sudden noises have to take hold of us; for we know or believe we know that they come from outside, from matter, and that the mind has no part in it, except insofar as it is subject to it. The thoughts that we form impose emotions on us, but do not take hold of us in that way. 74

The mystery is that sensations, in themselves almost indifferent, take hold of us in the same manner through their meaning. A few black lines on white paper, that is very different than a punch in the stomach. But sometimes the effect is the same. Everyone has experienced to a greater or lesser extent the effect of bad news that one reads in a letter or a newspaper; one feels seized,

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struck, as by a blow, before realising what it is about, and later even the sight of the letter remains painful. Sometimes, when time has dulled the pain a bit, if the letter suddenly appears among some papers one is handling, a more acute pain springs up, sudden too and piercing like a physical pain, taking hold as if it were coming from outside, as if it were lying in the fire. Two women each receive a letter, announcing to each that her son is dead; the first one, at her first glance upon the paper, collapses and never again, until her death, will her eyes, her mouth, her movements be as they once were. The second one stays the same, her expression, her attitude do not change; she cannot read. It is not the sensation, it is the meaning which has taken hold of the first, reaching her mind immediately, brutally, without her participation, just as sensations take hold. Everything happens as if the pain lay within the letter and from the letter jumped into the face of whoever is reading it. As for the sensations themselves, such as the colour of the paper, of the ink, they do not even appear. What is given to sight is the pain.

This is how at every instant of our life we are taken hold of as though from outside by the meanings that we ourselves read in the appearances. In consequence, one can endlessly debate the reality of the external world. For what we call the world are the meanings that we read; so it is not real.
75 But this takes hold of us as though from outside; so it is real. Why try to resolve this contradiction, when the highest task of thought, on this earth, is to define and contemplate insoluble contradictions, which, as Plato said, draw us upwards? What is peculiar, is that we are not given sensations and meanings; what we read is alone given to us; we do not see the letters. Studies of testimony, notably, have shown this well. Correcting proofs is difficult because while reading one sees most often the letters that the typesetters forgot as much as those which they had set; one must make oneself read another meaning, no longer those of the words or the sentences, but those of the letters of the alphabet, without altogether forgetting the first one. As for not reading, it is impossible; one cannot look at a text printed in a language one knows, suitably placed, and read nothing; at most, maybe one could achieve this by training oneself for a very long time.

The blind man's stick, an example found in Descartes, provides a picture analogous to that of reading. Everyone can convince himself when using a fountain pen that his sense of touch is as if transferred to the tip of the nib. If the nib comes into contact with some unevenness in the paper, this contact with the nib is given immediately, and the sensations of the fingers, of

the hand, through which we are reading it do not even appear. And yet this contact with the nib is only something that we read. The sky, the sea, the sun, the stars, human beings, and all that which surrounds us is likewise something that we read. What one calls a corrected sensory illusion is a modified reading. If in the evening, on an isolated road, I believe I see instead of a tree a man lying in wait, a human and menacing presence imposes itself on me and, as in the case of the letter, it makes me shudder even before I know what is happening; I approach, and suddenly everything is different, I'm afraid no longer, I read a tree and not a man. There is not an appearance and an interpretation; a human presence had penetrated through my eyes right to my soul, and now, suddenly, the presence is of a tree. If I hate someone, there is not him on one side, my hatred on the other; when he moves towards me, it is someone hateful that advances towards me; furthermore, the perversity of his soul is more obvious than the colour of his hair. Moreover, if it is blond, it is hateful blond, if it is brown, it is hateful brown. Esther moving towards Ahasuerus is not moving towards a man who she knows can put 76
her to death; she is moving towards majesty itself, terror itself, the sight of which reaches her soul, and that is why the effort of advancing drains her so. Besides, she says as much; what she contemplates with dread, is not the face of Ahasuerus, it is the majesty imprinted there and which she reads there. One generally speaks in such cases of an effect of the imagination; but perhaps it is better to use the word reading. This word implies that what is at issue are the effects produced by appearances, but appearances that do not appear, or barely so; what appears is something else which is to appearances as a sentence is to the letters; but it appears like an appearance, suddenly, brutally, from outside, and almost irrefutably due to its obviousness.

If I see a book bound in black, I do not doubt there is some black there, except to philosophise. If I see at the head of a newspaper: 14 June, I have no further doubt that 14 June is printed there. If a being whom I hate, whom I fear, whom I despise, or whom I love approaches, I am in no doubt about having before me something hateful, dangerous, despicable, or lovable. If someone, looking at the same part of the same newspaper, was seriously telling me, repeatedly, that he reads not 14 June, but 15 June, that would confuse me: I would not understand. If someone does not hate, does not fear, does not despise, does not love as I do, that also confuses me. How? He sees these beings—or, if they are distant, the indirect manifestations of their existence—and he does not read hateful, dangerous, despicable, or lovable?

It is not possible; he is in bad faith; he is lying; he is mad. It is not right to say that one believes in the danger because one is afraid; on the contrary, one is afraid from the presence of the danger; it is the danger that makes one afraid; but the danger is something that I read. The sounds, the visible appearances, are by themselves devoid of danger, they are to danger what the paper and the lines drawn in ink are in a threatening letter. But as in the case of a threatening letter the danger that I read grips me from the outside, and makes me afraid. If I hear an explosion, the fear lies in the noise and takes hold of my soul through my hearing, so that I could no more refuse to be afraid than refuse to hear. It is the same for the light rat-a-tat-tat of a machine gun, if that is a sound I know; but not if I do not know it. It is not, however, something analogous to a conditioned reflex; it is something analogous to
77 reading, where sometimes a wholly new combination of signs, that I have never seen, seizes my soul where the meaning that wounds penetrates, along with the white and the black, and just as irresistibly as they do.

Thus the meanings, which examined abstractly would seem to be mere thoughts, pop up around me on all sides, catch hold of my soul, altering it from moment to moment, in such a way that, to use a familiar English expression, "I can't call my soul my own." I believe what I read, my judgments are what I read, I act on what I read, how could I do otherwise? If within a noise I read honour to be won, I run towards that noise; if I read danger and nothing else, I run away from that noise. In both cases, the necessity of doing so, even if I experience regret, imposes itself on me in an obvious and immediate way, as the noise, with the noise; I read it in the noise. Similarly, if in the midst of civil unrest or in wartime one sometimes kills unarmed men, this is because what penetrates the souls of armed men through their eyes, at the same time as their clothes, hair and faces, is also a vileness in those beings that demands to be annihilated; in looking at them, as they read in a colour a mass of hair and in another flesh, they also read in those colours, with the same obviousness, the necessity to kill. If in the normal course of life there are few crimes, that is because we read in the colours that enter through our eyes when a human being is before us something which must to a certain extent be respected. Between these two states there is the same difference as between those of the man walking down an isolated road, when he reads in an appearance first a threatening man, then a tree. At first, it is entirely a response to a human presence, the idea that there might be a question about its being a man is an abstract idea, an

inconsistent one, which comes from him, not from outside, which does not take hold; then it happens like flipping a switch, suddenly, without transition, he is completely alone, surrounded only by things and plants; the idea that a man could have been where a tree is seen has in turn become inconsistent. Similarly, in peacetime, the idea of causing the death of a human being, should it come from within, is not read in the appearances; on the contrary one reads in the appearances the interdiction against acting that way. But in civil war, in relation to a certain category of human beings, it is the idea of sparing a life that is inconsistent, that comes from within, that is not read in the appearances; it crosses the mind, but does not turn into action. From one state to the other there is no possible transition; the shift happens like flipping a switch; each, when it is there, appears as the only 78
real one, the only possible one, and the other one seems purely imaginary. These are extreme examples; but our whole life is made up of the same material, of meanings that impose themselves in succession, and each one, when it appears and enters us through the senses, reduces all the ideas that could oppose it to the state of phantoms.

I possess a certain power over the universe, which allows me to change the appearances, but indirectly, through work, not through mere wish. I put white paper over this black book, and I no longer see black. This power is limited by the limits of my physical strength. I also perhaps possess a power to alter the meanings that I read in the appearances which impose themselves on me; but this power is also limited, indirect and is exercised through work. Work in the ordinary sense of the term is an example of this, for each tool is a blind man's stick, an instrument for reading, and every apprenticeship is apprenticeship in a reading. With the apprenticeship finished, meanings appear to me at the tip of my pen or as a sentence in printed characters. For the sailor, the experienced captain, whose boat has in a sense become an extension of his body, the boat is an instrument for reading the storm, and he reads it altogether differently than the passenger. Where the passenger reads chaos, limitless danger, and fear, the captain reads necessities, limited dangers, resources for escaping it, and an obligation of courage and of honour.

Action on oneself, action on others consist in transforming meanings. A man, the head of state, declares war, and new meanings pop up around each of forty million men. The art of a military leader is to bring the enemy

soldiers to read flight in appearances, so that the idea of holding their ground loses all substance, all efficacy; he can attain this, for example, by strategy, surprise, or the use of new weapons. War, politics, persuasion, art, teaching, and all action on another essentially consists in changing what men read.

Whether it is about oneself or about others, two problems present themselves, that of technique and that of value. Texts, whose appearances are letters, catch hold of my soul, abandon it, and are replaced by others; are some worth more than others? Are some more true than others? Where can one find a norm? To think of a true text that I am not reading, that I have never
79 read, is to think of a reader of this true text, that is to say God; but a contradiction appears at once, for I cannot apply this concept of reading to the being that I conceive when I speak of God. Besides, if I could do that, this would not yet allow me to order texts that I, myself, read according to a hierarchy of value.

The problem perhaps deserves the effort of being pondered, when posed this way. For thus posed it presents at once all possible problems of value to the extent that they are concrete. A man tempted to appropriate a deposit lodged with him will not abstain just because he will have read the *Critique of Practical Reason*; he will abstain from doing so, potentially, if it seems to him, in spite of himself, that the very sight of the deposit seems to cry out to him that it must be returned. Everyone has experienced similar states, where it seems that one would like to do something wrong, but cannot. Other times, one would like to do right, but cannot. Trying to find out whether the one who, looking at a deposit, reads it in this way, reads better than the one who reads in such an appearance all the desires he could satisfy by appropriating the deposit; trying to find out which criterion would allow deciding on the matter, which technique would allow passing from one reading to another, is a problem more concrete than trying to find out whether it is better to appropriate or return a deposit. On the other hand, the problem of value posed around this concept of reading relates to truth and beauty, as well as to good, without it being possible to separate them. This way perhaps their kinship, which is a mystery, would be somewhat clarified. We do not know how to think them jointly, and they cannot be thought separately.

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

Weil's distinctive conception of reading as a human capacity to sense meaning and possibility was a topic of enduring interest; her notebooks suggest she had wanted to write at length about it. This article, written in Marseilles in April or May 1941, was conceived for a philosophical journal, *Les Études philosophiques*, published in Marseilles' philosophical circles. It was eventually published there in 1946.

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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CONCEPT OF VALUE

53

The concept of value is at the centre of philosophy. All reflection bearing on 54
the concept of value, on a hierarchy of values, is philosophical; all effort of thought bearing on an object other than value is, if examined closely, foreign to philosophy. Due to that, the value of philosophy itself is beyond discussion. For the concept of value is in fact always present in the mind of all men; every man always orients his thoughts and his actions towards some good, and he cannot do otherwise. On the other hand, value is exclusively an object of reflection; it cannot be an object of experience. In one sense, the law of human life is: first philosophise, then live; for the choice between life and death, in a given situation, itself involves a comparison of values. Men, it is true, almost never give any thought to the values that orient their efforts; but that's because they believe they have sufficient grounds for adopting them.

A criterion for values is for every man the supreme necessity; but it is also what no man can ever attain. For all human knowledge is hypothetical; proofs are the product of theorems antecedently proved or from axioms, facts observed thanks to the sense organs are accepted as facts only to the extent that they are interconnected with other facts; but value cannot be a matter of hypothesis. A value is something accepted unconditionally. For at every moment, our life is in fact oriented according to some system 55

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of values; a system of values, at the moment when it orients a life, is not accepted on condition but is purely and simply accepted. Given that knowledge is conditional, values are not open to being known.

But one cannot give up on knowing them, since that would be to give up believing in them, which is impossible, because human life cannot but be oriented. Thus at the centre of human life there is a contradiction.

These considerations seem abstract on account of the difficulty of expressing them in language. Nonetheless this contradiction continually makes up, in various forms, the |*private*| essential drama of every human being, and it is easy to give as many concrete examples of this as one wants. Thus every artist knows that there can be no criterion which allows him to assert with certainty that such and such work is more beautiful than another. Yet every artist knows that there is a hierarchy of aesthetic values, that there are things more beautiful than others or that there are things which are beautiful and others that are not. If he did not know it, he would not put in the effort necessary to complete a work, he would not improve, he would not carry on. This condition of the artist, compelled to strain ceaselessly towards a beauty which is unknown to him, lends an anguished nuance to every effort of artistic creation. Any human situation can be the object of an analogous analysis.

All that can be taken as a purpose thus evades definition. The means—such as power, money—are themselves easy to define, and this is why most men orient themselves exclusively towards the acquisition of means. But then they fall into another contradiction, since there is a contradiction in taking mere means as ends. This contradiction is felt by all the [. . .]
[manuscript fragment missing]
[. . .] intuition of the mind and without thinking.

What more can be asked of a mind that establishes such an order among values? Must it also answer the question: is it certain that something has value? Isn't everything equally without value? Such a question is senseless, not only because there can be no method for finding the answer, but for a more profound reason. The ability to pose such a question rests entirely upon the ability to put words together; but the mind cannot truly pose this
56 question; it cannot be truly uncertain whether the concept of value is or is not something fictional. For the mind is essentially, always, however it might be disposed, a straining towards a value; it cannot regard the concept of value as uncertain, without regarding its own existence as uncertain, which for it is impossible.

As for the very order among values established through reflection, what uncertainty can be raised on this subject? The very principle of this order precludes one from being able to raise any. For as soon as an order among my thoughts becomes apparent to me, so that the value of a certain judgment is a condition for the value of all the others, except those that I know come before it, what more can I ask? Can I posit some other idea, unknown to me, truer than those which I have put at the head of the classification which perhaps contradicts them? But a comparison of value between two ideas implies the same mind thinking both of them; the posited idea must therefore be conceived as capable of being thought by me; but then I would conceive it as capable of being classified within the hierarchy of ideas, following the first ones, and then it would not have more value than they do. Since value is a characteristic of my thought, the hierarchy that I perceive among values is certain; nothing external to my thought could be known to falsify it; nothing external to my thought can alter the concept of value. And to appreciate the full import of this, one should remember that truth is a value |*of judgment*| of thought. The word truth can have no other meaning.

Thus the rigour and certitude of philosophical investigation are as great as they can be; the sciences do not come anywhere close. Must one conclude that philosophical reflection is infallible? Yes, it is infallible to the extent that it is practiced. But the human condition renders the practice of reflection, in the strict sense of the word, nearly impossible. For since the mind is a straining towards some value, how would it detach itself from the value it strains towards so as to consider it, judge it and then set it in its place in relation to the others? This detachment requires an effort, and all effort of the mind is a straining towards a value. Thus to effect this detachment, the mind must regard this very detachment as the supreme value. But to see in detachment a value superior to all the others, one must already be detached from all the others. There is here a vicious circle that makes the exercise of reflection appear like a miracle; the word grace expresses this miraculous character. The illusion of detachment is frequent, since one often mistakes a simple 57
change of value for detachment. The competitor in the full excitement of the game, breathless and anxious, does not ask himself why he desires to win, to what extent he is right to desire to win; he cannot ask himself that. After a few hours of this strain, this question might perhaps appear in his mind; it is not that he has detached himself, it is rather that due to exhaustion value has for him become resting and no longer winning. The detachment required

for philosophical reflection consists in detaching oneself not only from the values adopted an hour ago, yesterday, or a year ago, but from all values without exception, including all those towards which one is presently straining. A competitor who, at the very moment when he is breathless, expecting to win, could place winning on the same level as resting, as the sensual pleasure of eating well, work well done, friendship, or any other object of possible desire, and could impartially compare these various objects, is the image of detachment. It is indeed a miracle.

One can see well enough from this that philosophy does not, like science, consist in the acquisition of knowledge but in a change to the whole soul. Value is something that is related not only to knowledge, but to sensibility and to action; there is no philosophical reflection without an essential transformation within the sensibility and the practice of life, a |*alteration*| transformation which has equal impact on the most ordinary and the most tragic circumstances of life. Value being nothing but an orientation of the soul, to assert a value and to orient oneself towards it are one and the same thing; if one thinks two values at the same time, which could produce an inner conflict, one will orient oneself more towards the one to which one assigns the top rank. Reflection presupposes a transformation in the orientation of the |*mind*| soul that we call detachment; its purpose is to establish an order within the hierarchy of values, thus also a new orientation of the soul. Detachment is a renunciation of all possible purposes, without exception, a renunciation that puts a void in place of the future just as the imminent approach of death would do; this is why in the ancient mysteries, in Platonic philosophy, in Sanskrit texts, in Christian religion, and very probably always and everywhere, detachment has always been compared to death, and the initiation into wisdom regarded as a kind of passing through death. This
58 idea is found in the most ancient texts that we possess concerning human thought, those of Egypt, and it is probably as old as humanity. Thus all search for wisdom is oriented towards death. But the detachment in question is not devoid of purpose; detached thought has as its object the establishing of a true hierarchy among values, all values; it therefore has as its object a way of living, a better life, not elsewhere, but in this world and right now, since the values put in order are the values of this world. In this sense philosophy is oriented towards life, it seeks life via death. But the order of values established by reflection is not established once and for all; the soul conforms itself to it only to the extent that it thinks it and it cannot think it except by

an effort of reflection. So wisdom is a continuous back and forth from death to the best life and from the best life to death; without this back and forth there would be degeneration.

The claim that philosophical reflection is infallible is absolutely contrary to common opinion; generally one sees only conjectures in philosophy. What gives rise to this opinion are the contradictions between systems and within each system. It is generally believed that every philosopher has a system that contradicts the others. And yet far from this being the case, there is a philosophical tradition probably also as old as humanity which, it must be hoped, will outlast it; not all those who are called philosophers, it is true, draw on this tradition as a common source, but a number of them do, with the result that their |*systems*| thoughts are broadly equivalent. Plato is no doubt the most perfect representative of this tradition; the *Bhagavad-gītā* draws on the same inspiration, and one would easily find Egyptian and Chinese texts to list alongside them. In Europe, in modern times, one must mention Descartes and Kant; among more recent thinkers Lagneau and Alain in France, and Husserl in Germany. This philosophical tradition is what we call philosophy today. Far from being reproachable for its variations, it is one, eternal and not subject to progress. The only renewal of which it is capable is that of expression, as when a man expresses it to himself and expresses it to those around him in terms which are related to the conditions of the time, the civilisation, and the milieu in which he lives. It is desirable that such a transposition occur from one age to another, and this is the only reason why it might be worth the trouble of writing on a subject similar to one on which Plato has written.

The profound identity of |*all these systems*| these philosophies is concealed 59
by the apparent differences which are due to difficulties in vocabulary. Language was not made to express philosophical reflection; reflection cannot use language except by an adapting of the words which transforms the sense, without their new meaning being itself capable of being defined in words; that meaning does not appear except through the entirety of the formulations by which the author expresses his thought. One must therefore not only know all these formulations but perceive them as an entirety, and to that end consider them from the same point of view as the author, placing oneself at the centre of the author's thought. It is the same with a philosophical |*system*| work as it is with certain paintings; they are nothing but an unformed mass of colours until one has placed oneself at a certain

point from where everything falls into order. Thus comparing the assertions of different authors is senseless; if one wants to compare them, one must place oneself at the centre of the thought of each of them, and one will then understand whether their works are the product of the same spirit or not. However, a philosopher may well not make this effort with regard to his predecessors and thus be unaware that he is similar to them. But whether he is unaware of it or knows hardly matters.

It is true that there are |*systems*| authors who do not take their inspiration from this tradition; there is nothing surprising about that since philosophical reflection requires detachment, and detachment is a kind of miracle. Many of the authors who believe themselves to be philosophers, and are believed to be such by others, are incapable of reflection in the strict sense of the word, or are not quite capable of it in a manner sustained enough for all their work to be inspired by it; nonetheless, among these authors are some near the first rank, and their work merits the greatest interest. Besides, even the authors who practice reflection are not inspired by it consistently and on all points; their thought has failings, and these failings sometimes cause divergence between thinkers of the same lineage.

As for contradictions, all philosophical thought contains them; far from this being an imperfection of philosophical thought, it is an essential characteristic of it without which there is only a false semblance of philosophy. For true philosophy creates nothing; its object is given to it, it is our thoughts; it only makes, as Plato says, an inventory of them; if in the course of the inventory it finds contradictions, it is not for it to remove them, lest it should
60 lie. Philosophers who try to construct systems so as to eliminate these contradictions are those who seem to justify the opinion that philosophy is something conjectural; for such systems can be varied infinitely, and there is no reason for choosing one rather than another. But from the point of view of knowledge, these system are below even conjecture, for conjectures are inferior thoughts, and these systems are not thoughts. One cannot think them. One cannot do it, for if one could, even for an instant, one would in that instant eliminate the contradictions at issue, and one cannot eliminate them. The contradictions that reflection finds in thought when it makes an inventory of them are essential to thought, including the thought of the builders of systems; contradictions are present in their thought during the very time when they are elaborating and expounding their systems; but they make use of words that do not conform to their thoughts, and this due to an

excess of ambition. Thus those who deny the reality of the external world, at the moment when they say they deny it, have the same sense of the reality of their table and their chair as any old peasant. They make the same distinction between their perceptions and their dreams as any old peasant. To take an even clearer example, to say that a line has a specific length and simultaneously contains an infinite number of points implies a contradiction; it is to think the same thing as finite and as infinite. But the Greeks who said that a line is composed of a finite number of points were driven solely by the desire to eliminate this contradiction; they were not thinking what they were saying; one cannot think it. One cannot think of a part of a line, repeated in that line a finite number of times, other than as itself a length, one cannot think an indivisible length. The contradiction that one wanted to eliminate reappears; better therefore to have brought it out. Decisive progress would be realised if one decided to bring out honestly the contradictions essential to thought instead of seeking in vain to exclude them; a great number of formulations devoid of sense would disappear this way not only in philosophy, but also in the sciences, including the most precise of them. As for the complete systems constructed with the aim of eliminating all the essential contradictions of thought, one would understand that if they have any value, it can only be poetical; in this respect Valéry's claim is quite correct.

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

This essay, written in Marseilles in the first two months of 1941, was not published for more than 50 years after Weil's death. It appears to be a response to ideas on value expressed by the French writer, poet and public intellectual, Paul Valéry. Without setting out Valéry's position, Weil counters it by proposing a view in which value, as she defines it, is central to understanding philosophy itself, especially in the mystical tradition of philosophy with which she identified.

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THIS WAR IS A WAR OF RELIGIONS[1]

This war is a war of religions. 250

Men have often dreamt of doing away with the religious problem. This was Lucretius' dream. "How many crimes has religion been able to recommend!"[2] The Encyclopedists believed they had succeeded in doing so. Their influence has indeed been felt in all countries, across all continents.

And yet there is today perhaps no human being in the world who does not suffer, daily, in his inner life due to the repercussions of a unique religious drama whose theatre is the whole planet.

What makes man unable to avoid the religious problem is that the opposition of good and evil is an unbearable burden for him. Morality |*forms*| is 251
something wherein he cannot breathe.

An Albigensian legend recounts how the devil seduced creatures by telling them, "With God you are not free, for you cannot do anything but good.

1 This essay was left untitled and the title comes from the first sentence. The editors of the *Oeuvres complètes* speculate that Weil may have been responding to a radio lecture by Jacques Maritain where he argued that the war was a war of *civilisations*.

2 Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* [*On the Nature of Things*], I.101. Weil translates, "[T]antum religio potuit suadere malorum".

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Follow me and you will have the power to do good or evil as you like." Experience confirms this legend, for innocence is lost every day through the lure of knowledge and experience, much more than of pleasure.

Man has followed the devil. He has received what the devil promised him. But put into possession of the pair, good and evil, he is as much at ease as a child who has picked up a burning coal. He would like to drop the coal. He discovers that this is difficult.

There are three methods for doing so.

The first is irreligious. It consists in denying the reality of the opposition between good and evil. Our century has tried it. A horrible saying of Blake's has had a great impact among our contemporaries, "It is better to strangle an infant in its cradle than to keep an unfulfilled desire in your heart."[3]

Only it is not desire that directs effort, it is the goal. The very essence of man is directed effort; the thoughts of the soul, the movements of the body, are merely forms of this. When the direction disappears, man becomes mad in the literal, medical sense of the word. That is why this method, based on the principle that everything is of equal value, drives one mad. Though it imposes no constraints, it plunges man into a tedium similar to that of the unfortunates condemned to solitary confinement whose greatest misery is having nothing to do.

Europe has fallen into this tedium |*after*| since the last war. That is why it has made almost no effort to escape the concentration camps.

In times of prosperity, with superabundant resources, one tries to cheat such tedium by playing. Not the games of children, who believe in their games. The games of grown men in captivity.

But in times of calamity energy is not enough to meet one's needs. The problem of knowing how to direct one's energies no longer arises. |*One*| Man no longer has anything to direct but his hope. The hope of the unfortunate is no material for a game. The emptiness thus becomes unbearable. The system which posits that everything is of equal value is rejected with horror.

252 This is what happened in Europe. Nations have moved toward this horror one after the other as the calamity came upon them.

3 This translates Weil's French which, however, distorts somewhat William Blake's original, "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires", known as Proverb 67 of his "Proverbs of Hell" in the *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790.

The second method is idolatry. It is a religious method, if one takes the word religion in the sense in which it is taken by the French sociologists, as the adoration of social reality under the names of various deities. This is what Plato likened to the cult of a great beast.

This method consists in delimiting a social sphere inside which the pair of opposites, good and evil, has no right of entry. As a part of this sphere, man is no longer subject to that pair.

This method is used often. A scientist or an artist often believe themselves to be as such freed of any obligation, having made science or art into an enclosed space where virtue and vice do not enter. So too for a soldier or a priest sometimes; this explains the sacking of cities and the Inquisition. More generally, this art of compartmentalisation has over the course of centuries led to the perpetrating of many monstrosities by men who did not seem to be monsters.

But the method is flawed whenever it is incomplete. A scientist is not delivered from the pair, good and evil, as father, as husband or as citizen. For the deliverance to be total, the zone from which the opposition of good and evil is excluded must be such that a man could enter it in his entirety.

A nation can play this role. This was the case in antiquity for Rome and for Israel. Once a Roman had in his own eyes ceased to exist in any capacity other than that of being Roman, he was free of good and evil. He was ruled only by the purely animal law of expansion. He only had to give thought to dominating |*nations*| peoples as absolute master, sparing more or less those who obeyed, crushing those who stood up to him in their pride. The means employed were indifferent, other than from the perspective of efficacy.

A church can also play the same role. The appearance of the Inquisition in the Middle Ages shows that a current of totalitarianism had undoubtedly slipped into Christianity. Fortunately it did not prevail, but it may have caused the abortion of that Christian civilisation which the Middle Ages had been on the point of producing.

In our time, nations alone exercise this function, not directly but through the intermediary of a state party and the organisations that surround it. In 253
one-party states the member of the party who has once and for all abdicated any characteristic other than that of his membership is no longer subject to sin. He may be clumsy, like a servant breaking a plate. But whatever he does, he can do no evil, for he is exclusively a member of a body, the Party, the Nation, which can do no evil.

He does not lose this protection, this armour, unless he suddenly becomes again a being of flesh and blood or a being who has a |*intelligence*| soul,

in short something other than a small part of this |*great beast*| body. But the privilege of being free of good and evil is so valuable that many men and women, having chosen once and for all, remain unyielding before love, friendship, physical suffering and death.

It costs them, and it is no wonder that that they in turn take pleasure in torturing the weak. They need to prove to themselves experientially the reality of this absolute licence for the privilege of which they have paid so dearly.

Just like the indifference to good and evil, such idolatry leads to a kind of madness. But these are two very different forms of madness. Germany had contracted the first to a greater extent than any other country in Europe. Its reaction has been proportionately violent. But by falling back with despair into the second of these two forms, it has retained much |*of the traits*| of the first. Their combination has produced what has in recent years been the horror and terror of the world.

Yet we must not fail to understand that Germany is a mirror for all of us 20th-century people. What we see in it as so hideous are our own traits, only magnified. This thought should take nothing away from the energy for the struggle, on the contrary.

Idolatry is degrading. Fortunately, it is also precarious. For the idol is perishable. Rome ended up being sacked and reduced to servitude in its turn. Folklore is full of stories of giants whom no one can hurt because they have hidden their soul in an egg which is in a fish which is in a far-off lake guarded by dragons. But one day a young man uncovers the secret, seizes the egg and kills the giant. This is because the giant had been foolish enough to hide his soul somewhere on this earth, in this world. A young S.S. member is similarly foolish. To be safe one must hide one's soul elsewhere.

254 The art of attaining this constitutes the third method, which is mysticism. Mysticism is the passage beyond the sphere where good and evil are opposed, and this through the union of the soul with absolute good. Absolute good is something other than good which is the opposite and correlate of evil, even though it is its model and its principle.

Such a union is an actual process. Just as a young woman, after having been with a husband or a lover, is no longer a virgin, so the soul having passed through such a union has become different forever.

It is a reverse transformation to the one that has taken place when creatures have followed the devil. Consequently it is a difficult operation, even impossible, and contrary to the law of the deterioration of energy, more so even than the transformation of heat into movement. But the impossible is

possible for God. Indeed in one sense, only the impossible is possible for God. He has ceded the possible to the mechanisms of matter and the autonomy of creatures.

The techniques and the effects of this transformation have been studied empirically in the most painstaking manner in antiquity by the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Hindus, the Chinese and probably many others, in the Middle Ages by some Buddhist sects, by Muslims and by Christians. For several centuries these things have been more or less forgotten everywhere.

The very nature of such a transformation precludes any hope of seeing it accomplished in an entire people. But the whole life of an entire people can be infused with a religion that would be entirely oriented towards the mystical. This orientation alone distinguishes religion from idolatry.

The French sociological school is nearly right in its social explanation of religion. It needs one infinitely small thing to be right. Only that infinitely small thing is the grain of mustard, the pearl in the field, the leaven in the dough, or the salt in the food. This infinitely small thing is God, which is to say infinitely more than everything.

Within the life of a people as within the life of a soul, the only thing to do is to place this infinitely small thing at its centre. Anything which is not in direct contact with it should be as though imbued with it through the intermediary of beauty. This was almost achieved in the Romanesque Middle Ages, that astonishing period when men's eyes and ears were filled daily with perfectly simple and pure beauty.

The difference between |*an organisation of w*[*ork*]| a structuring of work 255
which opens the beauty of the world to men and another which closes it off is infinitely small. But this infinitely small difference is real. Where it is absent, nothing imaginary can replace it.

Everywhere and always, if such words are permissible for summarising, until recently, the structuring of work has been corporatist. Institutions such as slavery, serfdom, and the proletariat attached themselves to corporatist organisation like a cancer in an organ. For several centuries now, the cancer has replaced the organ.

When fascism promotes the corporatist approach, it is with the same sincerity as when it speaks of peace. In fact, none of what we today call corporatism has anything at all in common with the earlier corporatist bodies. Anti-fascism too can one day adopt this arrangement and behind that curtain fall into a state capitalism in totalitarian form. A true corporatist structure will not grow in an environment which has not been spiritually prepared for it.

Calamity had fallen upon Germany in the form of an economic crisis; it pushed it violently out of the emptiness of indifference into a fury of idolatry. Calamity has fallen upon France in the form of a conquest. National idolatry is not possible for a subjugated people.

Of the three methods to get rid of the opposition of good and evil, none is accessible to slaves or subject peoples. At the same time, sorrows and humiliations are every day injecting evil into them from the outside which awakens the evil within in the form of fear and hatred. They can neither forget the evil nor get free of it and live thus in the best earthly imitation of hell.

But the three methods are not equally inaccessible. Two are impossible. The one that is supernatural is merely difficult. There is no access to it except through spiritual poverty. Just as the virtue of spiritual poverty is indispensable to the rich to distance them from the defilement of riches, so it is indispensable to the destitute to keep them from falling apart in their destitution. It is as difficult for the one as for the other. Subdued and oppressed Europe will not see better days at the moment of her liberation unless, in the meantime, the virtue of spiritual poverty has taken root there.

When it comes to civilisation, the masses cannot create it unless genuine
256 elites infuse them with an inspiration. What is required today is an elite that kindles the virtue of spiritual poverty among the destitute masses. To do that, what is required is that the members of this elite are first of all poor not only spiritually, but in fact. What that requires is that they suffer every day, in their soul and in their flesh, the sorrows and humiliations of destitution.

It is not a new Franciscan order that is required. A monk's habit or a monastery is a separation. These people have to be in the midst of the masses and touch them without anything intervening. |*Even a label is too much*| And, what is more difficult than enduring destitution, they have to allow themselves no compensation; they have to |*endure it*| sincerely bring the same humility into their relations with the masses around them as a naturalised citizen does toward the citizens of the country that has taken him in.

Had it been understood that this war would be a religious drama, one could have foreseen years earlier which nations would be the actors, which the passive victims. Nations that did not live by a religion could not be anything but passive victims. This was the case for almost all of Europe. But Germany lives by an idolatry. Russia lives by another idolatry; it may also be that under this idolatry some remains of a disavowed past still quiver. And

although England is being eaten away by the maladies of the century, there is such continuity in the history of this country, such life-giving power within its tradition, that some roots still draw from it the lifeblood of a past permeated with |*true religion*| mystical light.

There was a moment when England was facing Germany like an empty-handed child alone before a brute brandishing a revolver in each hand. A child in this situation cannot do much. But if it coolly looks the brute in the eyes, it is certain that the brute will hesitate for a moment.

That is what happened. Germany, to conceal this hesitation from itself, to give itself an alibi, threw itself upon Russia and there it shattered the best of its forces. The torrents of blood shed by the Russian soldiers have almost made one forget what came before. Yet |*what preceded it is more deserving of eternal remembrance*| that moment when England stood silent and motionless is even more worthy of an everlasting remembrance. This halting of the German troops at the Channel is the part played by the supernatural in this war. A part, as always, negative, imperceptible, infinitely small, and decisive. The 257
waves of the sea travel far but something stops them. Antiquity knew that it is God that assigns a limit.

There was a time when all the walls in France were covered with posters that said, "We will win because we are stronger." That was the most fatuous statement of this war. The decisive moment was the one when our strength was almost naught. The enemy force was stopped because their strength, not being divine, is subject to limit.

The war has spread to other continents. The idolatry that animates Japan is perhaps even more violent than in any other people. In the United States the belief in democracy is still alive, whereas in France, for example, even before the war, even before Munich, it was nearly dead. But our age is a time of idolatry and of faith, not of mere belief. For America, the war is still recent and attenuated by distance. But under its impact, if it lasts, profound transformations will almost certainly take place.

Europe remains at the centre of the drama. From the fire cast upon the earth by Christ, which was perhaps the same as the fire of Prometheus, some burning embers had remained in England. This was enough to prevent the worst. But we have secured only a respite. We remain lost unless from these embers and the sparks |*covering*| flickering on the continent a flame emerges capable of igniting Europe.

If we are delivered only by the money and the factories of America, we will one way or another fall back into another servitude equivalent to the one we are suffering now. It must not be forgotten that Europe has not been subjugated by hordes from another continent or from planet Mars who could just be driven away. Europe is suffering from an internal malady. It needs a cure.

It will only be able to survive if it has, at least in large part, saved itself. Fortunately it cannot resort to an idolatry that it might set against that of the conquerors, because enslaved nations cannot become idols. Subjugated countries can only counter the conqueror with a religion.

Were a faith to arise on this unhappy continent, victory would be rapid, certain and |*enduring*| robust. This is obvious even on the strategic level. Our lines of communication stretch over the seas and we have to defend them
258 against submarines. Enemy lines of communications run through oppressed peoples and would become impossible if the fire of a true faith were to spread over this whole territory.

But neither the description of the latest bombers, nor production statistics, nor the promise of clothes or food can lay the ground for the emergence of a true faith. There is only one road towards faith for the afflicted and that is the virtue of spiritual poverty. But this is a hidden truth. For spiritual poverty seems like the acceptance of servitude. It is even identical to it up to almost the infinitely smallest detail. As always the same infinitely small thing, which is infinitely more than everything.

Calamity is not in itself a school of spiritual poverty. It is just the almost unique opportunity to learn from it. Although it is much less fleeting than happiness, it nevertheless passes, and so one must hurry.

Will we put the present opportunity to good use? This problem is probably more important |*militarily*| than strategic plans, more important economically than statistics and tables of allocations. Hitler has taught us, if we are capable of learning, that a truly realistic politics takes account first and foremost of thoughts.

He is playing for evil; his materials are the masses, the dough. We are playing for good, our material is the leaven. |*The difference*| The methods must differ accordingly.

Oeuvres complètes V:1

Written in London in 1943, unpublished in Weil's lifetime, this essay is one of several sparked by Weil's work for the Free French. In it Weil makes clear that the war with the Axis powers should not be understood only as a military conflict but as a conflict with a spiritual dimension. It is notable also for outlining how Weil conceives alternatives for how people bear the burden of good and evil.

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13

ARE WE FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE?

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"The examination of what is just is something one undertakes only when 240
there is equal necessity on both sides. Wherever there is a strong and a weak, the possible is done by the first and accepted by the second."[1]

Thus speak in Thucydides the Athenians come to bring an ultimatum to the unfortunate little city of Melos.

They add, "Regarding the gods we have the belief, regarding men the certainty, that always, by a necessity of nature, each commands everywhere where he has the power to do so."[2]

They have thus expressed in two sentences the totality of political realism. Only the Greeks of this period were able to conceive evil with this marvellous lucidity. They no longer loved the good but their fathers, who had loved it, had passed on its light to them. They made use of it to know the truth of evil. Men had not yet entered into falsehood. This is why it was not the Athenians, but the Romans, who founded an empire.

These two sentences are the sort that shock kindly souls. But as long as a man has not experienced their truth in the flesh, the blood and the entire soul, he cannot yet have access to the real love of justice.

1 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, V.89.
2 Thucydides, V.105.

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241 The Greeks defined justice admirably by mutual consent.

"Love," says Plato, "neither does nor suffers injustice, neither among the gods nor among men. For it does not suffer by force when it suffers; since force does not take hold of Love. And it does not act by force when it acts; since everyone consents to obey Love in all things. Where there is agreement by mutual consent there is justice, say the laws of the royal city."[3]

In this way the opposition of the just and the possible in the words quoted by Thucydides is very clear. When there is equal force on both sides, one seeks the conditions for mutual consent. When someone does not have the ability to refuse, one does not go looking for a way to obtain his consent. The conditions corresponding to objective necessities are then the only ones examined; one seeks only the consent of matter.

In other words, human action has no other rule or limit than obstacles. It has no contact with realities other than these. Matter imposes obstacles which are determined by its mechanism. A man can impose obstacles through a power of refusal that sometimes he has and sometimes not. When he does not have it, he does not constitute an obstacle nor consequently a limit. In relation to the action and to the one who performs it, he has no existence.

Any time there is action, thought is moved towards its goal. Without obstacles the goal would be reached as soon as it is thought. Sometimes it is like this. A child sees his mother in the distance after an absence and he is in her arms almost before knowing that he has seen her. But when immediate realisation is impossible, thought, initially fixed on the goal, is inevitably solicited by the obstacles.

It is solicited by them alone. Where there are none, it does not stop. Whatever in the matter of its action is not an obstacle—for example men deprived of the ability to refuse—is as transparent to it as completely clear glass is to sight. It is not for it to stop there, just as it is not up to sight to see the glass.

Someone who does not see a windowpane does not know that he does not see it. Someone who, being differently placed, does see it, does not know that the first does not see it.

When our will happens to be translated outside of us through actions executed by others, we do not spend our time and efforts of attention examining whether they have consented to it. That is true for all of us. Our attention,

3 Plato, *Symposium*, 196b-c.

spent entirely on the success of the undertaking, is not solicited by them as long as they are compliant.

That is necessary. If it were not so, things would not get done and if things 242
did not get done, we would perish.

But as a result action is defiled with sacrilege. For human consent is a sacred things. It is what man grants to God. It is what God comes seeking like a beggar among men.

What God continually begs each man to grant is the very thing that other men despise.

Rape is a terrible caricature of love from which consent is absent. After rape, oppression is the second horror of human existence. It is a terrible caricature of obedience. Consent is as essential to obedience as it is to love.

The butchers of the city of Melos were pagans in the hateful sense of the word, whereas their fathers had not been so. In a single sentence they have completely and perfectly defined the pagan conception. "About the gods, we believe that always, by a necessity of nature, each commands everywhere where he has the power to do so."[4]

The Christian faith is merely the cry affirming the opposite. It is the same for the ancient doctrines of China, India, Egypt and Greece.

The act of creation is not an act of power. It is an abdication. By this act a kingdom was established other than the kingdom of God. The reality of this world is constituted by the mechanism of matter and the autonomy of rational creatures. It is a kingdom from which God has withdrawn. God having renounced being its king, can only come to it as a beggar.

As for the cause of this abdication, Plato states it thus, "He was good."[5]

The Christian doctrine contains the idea of a second abdication. "[. . .] Being in the form of God, he did not view equality with God as a prize. He emptied himself. He took on the form of the slave. [. . .] He humbled himself to the point of being made obedient even unto death. [. . .] Though he was the Son, what he suffered taught him obedience."[6]

These words could be an answer to the Athenian murderers of Melos. They would really have made them laugh. The Athenians would have been right. They are absurd. They are mad.

4 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, V.105, as given earlier.
5 *Timaeus*, 29e.
6 Phil 2:6–10, incorporating Heb 5:8.

And, just as the content of these words is absurd and mad, so, comparatively, it would be absurd and mad for anybody to impose on himself the necessity of soliciting consent where there is no power to refuse. It is the same madness.

243 Yet Aeschylus said of Prometheus, "It is good to love to the point of seeming mad."[7]

The madness of love, when it has seized a human being, completely transforms the modalities of action and thought. It is akin to the madness of God. The madness of God consists in needing the free consent of men. Men mad with love for their fellows are in pain when thinking that everywhere in the world human beings are used as intermediaries of the will of others without having consented to it. It is unbearable for them to know that this is often true about their own will and the will of the groups of which they are a part. In all their actions and thoughts related to human beings, whatever be the nature of the relation, each man without exception appears to them as constituted by a capacity to consent freely to good through love, a capacity imprisoned in soul and flesh. It is not doctrines, conceptions, inclinations, intentions, and desires which thus transform the mechanism of a human mind. It takes madness.

A man without money, eaten away by hunger, cannot see without pain anything relating to food. For him a town, a village, a street is nothing but restaurants and food shops, with vague houses all around. If walking down a street he comes to a restaurant, it is impossible for him not to stop a while. Yet there is here, it seems, no obstacle to his walking by. But there is one for him because of his hunger. The other passers-by, strolling without a care or going about their business, move through these streets as if before a stage backdrop. For him, each restaurant turned into an obstacle through the operation of this invisible mechanism possesses the fullness of reality.

But the condition for this is that he be hungry. None of this happens unless there is a need in him eating away at his body.

Men struck by the madness of love need to see the faculty of free consent flourish everywhere in this world, in all forms of human life, for all human beings.

7 The editors of the *Oeuvres complètes* suggest that Weil may be quoting from Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, lines 386–7, though these do not mention love.

What's it to them? think reasonable people. But it is not their fault, the poor souls. They are mad. Their insides are scrambled. They hunger and thirst for justice.

Just as all restaurants are real for the starved wretch, likewise for them all human beings are real. For them alone. It is always a particular play of circumstances or a particular gift of personality which arouses in normal peo- 244
ple the sensation that a particular human being really exists. These madmen, they can direct their attention at whichever human placed in whichever circumstances and receive from him the shock of reality.

But for this they have to be mad, they have to carry in them a need as destructive for the natural equilibrium of the soul as hunger is for the functioning of the organs.

The mass of beings deprived of the power to grant or refuse consent, does not have, in its entirety, the least chance of rising as far as gaining possession of it without some complicity from within the ranks of those in control. But there is no such complicity except among the mad. And the more madness there is below, the greater the chance that it appears at the top through the contagion of madness.

To the extent to which, at any given moment, there is the madness of love among men, to that extent there is the possibility of change in the direction of justice and no further.

One must be blind to set justice against charity; to believe that their domain is different, that one is broader, that there is a charity beyond justice or a justice short of charity.[8]

When the two ideas are opposed, charity is no more than a caprice often of base origin, and justice is only social constraint. Those who are ignorant of this have either never been in one of those situations where there is

8 'Charity' in English will likely call to mind charitable giving or institutions created for that purpose. The French word *charité* has a wider meaning, retained in English in expressions like a 'charitable interpretation', that suggest an effort to treat someone with kindness or good will where one can. *Charité* in French suggests a neighbourly love—it is not an attachment, like friendship or romantic love—and in that sense can be seen to be the same as love of neighbour. Weil understands the term to be suggestive of essential mutuality: *charité* is attentive to the loved one's consenting to be loved. While translating *charité* as 'charity' risks misleading the English reader, it would be more misleading to translate it as love or caring.

every licence for injustice or else were settled into mendacity to the point of believing they could easily act justly in them.

It is just not to steal merchandise on display. It is charitable to give alms. Yet the shopkeeper can send me to prison. The beggar, even if his life depended on my help, will not report me to the police if I refuse it to him.

Many of the controversies between the right and the left come down to the opposition between a taste for individual caprice and a taste for social constraint; or more exactly perhaps, between the dread of social constraint and the dread of individual caprice. Neither charity nor justice have anything to do with this.

The object of justice is the exercise of the faculty of consent on earth. To preserve it religiously everywhere where it exists, to try to create the conditions for it wherever it is missing, that is to love justice.

245 The single and so beautiful word justice encapsulates the whole meaning of the three words of the French motto. Liberty is the real possibility of granting consent. Men do not need equality except in relation to justice. The spirit of fraternity consists in wanting justice for all.

The possibility of consent is provided by a life which contains motives for consent. Destitution, privations of the soul and of the body prevent consent from being able to take place in the secrecy of the heart.

The expression of consent is indispensable only secondarily. |*Expression through it*| An unexpressed thought is imperfect, but if it is real it can find indirect routes for expression. Expression to which no thought corresponds is a lie, and there is always, everywhere, the possibility of lies.

Obedience being in fact the imprescriptible law of human life, there is only to establish the difference between consenting obedience and non-consenting obedience. Where there is consented obedience, there is freedom, and nowhere else.

Freedom cannot reside in a parliament, a press or any institution. It resides in obedience. Where obedience does not everywhere have a daily and permanent savour of freedom, there is no freedom. Freedom is the savour of true obedience.

The forms and the expressions of consent vary greatly among traditions and communities. So a society composed of men much more free than we are can, if it is very different from ours, appear despotic because of our ignorance. We are not aware that outside the domain of words, there are language differences and possibilities for misinterpretation. And we

sustain this ignorance within us because it gratifies in all of us a shameful, unacknowledged taste for conquests that enslave under the banner of liberation.

On the other side, there is a certain kind of devotion linked to slavery which, far from being a sign of consent, is the direct effect of a system of brutal constraint; for in affliction human nature looks desperately for compensations anywhere at all. Hate, sullen indifference, and blind attachment are all equally good for it to escape the thought of affliction.

Wherever there is freedom, there is a flowering of happiness, beauty and poetry; that is perhaps its only hallmark.

Democratic thought contains a grave error, it is confusing consent with a 246
specific form of consent, which is not the only one and which can easily, like any form, be an empty form.

Our parliamentary democracy was pointless, because when we chose some of our leaders we despised them, we resented those we had not chosen, and we obeyed them all grudgingly.

Consent is neither sold nor bought. Consequently, whatever the political institutions, in a society where the exchange of money dominates the greater part of social activity, where nearly all obedience is bought and sold, there can be no liberty. |*Political institutions are unable to do anything about this*|

Just as oppression is analogous to rape, so the domination of money over work, pushed to the point where money becomes the motive for work, is analogous to prostitution.

Enthusiasm is not consent, it is a superficial habituated response of the soul. It is to consent what the sick attachment of a promiscuous man to a lustful woman is to the marital union.

Where there are no motives known other than compulsion, money and a carefully tended and stimulated enthusiasm, there is no possibility of freedom.

Yet, this is almost the case today, in varying degrees, in all the countries of the white race and in all those where the influence of the white race has penetrated.

If England is to quite a large |*certain*| extent an exception, this is because there is still a bit of the past alive and intact in her. This past, present throughout her, was for a time the only glimmer of salvation for the world. But there is no comparable treasure elsewhere.

Liberty is unfortunately not for us something on the point of being retrieved, a familiar object that might have been unexpectedly purloined. It is something to be invented.

We, the French, once launched into the world the principles of 1789. But we are wrong to take pride in this. For neither then nor since have we known how to think about them nor how to put them into practice. Their memory should rather counsel humility.

It is true that humility seems a sacrilege when it comes to one's country. But that prohibition puts a barrier between modern patriotism and the spirit of justice and love. The Pharisaic spirit poisons at its source any sentiment that does not include humility.

247 Modern patriotism is a sentiment inherited from Pagan Rome which has come down to us across so many Christian centuries without having been baptised. For this very reason it does not accord with the spirit of the principles of 1789; they cannot be aligned with each other truthfully, as would be necessary for the French.

Such as it is, patriotism can steel some men to the point of the supreme sacrifice but it cannot nourish the desperate masses of today. They need something that would be not Corneillian, but familiar, human, warm, simple and without pride.

For obedience to be consented, there must first of all |*first to give to*| be something to love, something for the love of which men consent to obey.

Something to love, not through hatred of its opposite but in itself. The spirit of consented obedience stems from love, not from hatred.

Hatred, it is true, provides an imitation of it at times very dazzling, but still mediocre, low quality, not lasting, and soon depleted.

Something to love not for its glory, its prestige, its sparkle, its conquests, its radiance, its future prospects, but in itself, in its nakedness and its reality, as a mother whose son came first in the *Polytechnique* entrance exam loves something else in him. Without it the feeling is not profound enough to be a permanent source of obedience.

What is needed is something that a people can love naturally, from the depth of their hearts, from the depth of their own past, from their traditional aspirations and not through suggestion, propaganda or foreign import.

What is needed is a love drunk quite naturally with mother's milk, a love that leads young people to enter once and for all, in the innermost secrecy

of their heart, into a pact of fidelity of which a lifetime of obedience is only its continuation.

What is needed are forms of social life designed in such a way as to remind the people ceaselessly, in the symbolic language most intelligible to them, most in keeping with their customs, their traditions, and their attachments, of the sacred character of this fidelity, the free consent from which it arose and the stringent obligations proceeding from it.

From this point of view, here in France, the Republic, universal suffrage and independent trade unionism are absolutely indispensable. But this is 248
infinitely far from being sufficient since these things had become matters of indifference and have only begun arousing interest again a long time after they had been destroyed.

As for the Empire, if the preceding suggestions contain any truth they strictly require, on pain of lying, posing all the problems relating to the colonies in an absolutely different light than is done now.

We will not find liberty, equality, or fraternity without a renewal of the forms of life, a creation in social matter, and an outpouring of inventions.

But it seems that we are too exhausted for an outpouring.

Men as a whole have morally reached that degree of sickness where there seem to be no cure but the miraculous. Miraculous, that is to say not impossible, but possible only under certain conditions.

The conditions in which a soul can be open to grace are of a different kind than those in a mechanical operation. But they are determined even more strictly. It is even more impossible to find some ruse, some fraud which enables avoiding them.

It is not easy to fight for justice. It is not enough to identify which camp is the one of least injustice and, having gone there, to take up arms and expose oneself to enemy arms. Admittedly that is beautiful, more than words can say. But, on the other side, they do exactly the same.

One must in addition be imbued with the spirit of justice. The spirit of justice is nothing other than the supreme and perfect flower of the madness of love.

The madness of love makes |*every kind*| compassion a much more powerful motive for every kind of action, including combat, than greatness, glory and even honour.

It compels one to abandon everything for compassion and, as St. Paul says of Christ, to empty oneself.

In the midst of even unjustly inflicted suffering, it makes one consent to submit to the universal law that exposes every creature of this world to injustice. This consent keeps the soul from evil; in the soul where this takes place, it has the miraculous, inherent power of transforming evil into good, injustice into justice; through it, suffering accepted with respect, without servility or rebellion, becomes something divine.

The madness of love inclines one to recognise and cherish equally, in all
249 the human milieux without exception, in all parts of the globe, the fragile earthly possibilities of beauty, of happiness and of fulfilment; to want to preserve them all with an equally religious care; where they are missing, to want to breathe life tenderly into the slightest traces of those that have existed, the slightest seeds of those that might be born.

The madness of love introduces into a place in the heart deeper than indignation and courage, into the place from which indignation and courage draw their vigour, a tender compassion for the enemy.

The madness of love does not seek to express itself. But it radiates irresistibly through accent, tone and manner, across all thoughts, all words and all actions, in all circumstances and without any exceptions. It makes impossible the thoughts, words and actions through which it cannot radiate.

It truly is a madness. It leads one to risks one cannot take if one has given one's heart to anything whatsoever in this world, be it a great cause, or a Church, or a country.

The outcome to which the madness of love led Christ is not, after all, a recommendation for it.

But we do not have to fear its perils. It does not live in us. |*We are*| If it did, it would be felt. We are reasonable people, as surely seems proper for those who concern themselves with the great affairs of this world.

But if the order of the universe is a wise order, there must sometimes be moments when, from the perspective of earthly reason, the madness of love alone is reasonable. These moments cannot but be those when, as today, humanity has become mad from want of love.

Is it certain that today the madness of love is not liable to give the unhappy masses, whose bodies and souls are hungry, food much easier for them to digest than inspirations from a less exalted source?

And then, such as we are, is it certain that we belong in the camp of justice?

S. WEIL

Oeuvres complètes V:1

Written in London in 1943, unpublished in Weil's lifetime, this essay is of a piece with others of that time such as "Legitimacy of the provisional government" and "Is the human person sacred?" Each questions the role of our political arrangements in assisting or inhibiting the realisation of justice. Here the question is asked of the ongoing patriotic struggle to liberate France, with Weil wondering whether this is not a moment to advance to a more elevated concept of justice.

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14

IS THE HUMAN PERSON SACRED?[1]

Collectivity—person—impersonal—rights—justice[2]

"You do not interest me." That is a remark a man cannot address to a man 212
without committing a cruelty and injuring justice.

"Your person does not interest me." This remark can have a place in an affectionate conversation between close friends without injuring that in their friendship which is most easily upset.

Likewise one could say without demeaning oneself, "My person does not count," but not, "I do not count."

That is the proof that the vocabulary of the current of modern thought called "personalist" is erroneous. And in this domain, wherever there is a

1 In an earlier draft Weil had written this title down, before striking through it. It seems closest though to encapsulating the driving question of the text and is on that basis adopted here for the title of the piece.

2 The *Œuvres complètes* editors note that Simone Weil had initially given the following title, "Should we retain 'personalist' vocabulary". In place of 'retain', which she crossed out, she had written below the line 'replace'. Then she had put a line in ink across the whole, and the five words reprised here became the *de facto* title.

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serious error of vocabulary, it is difficult for there not to be a serious error of thought.

There is in each man something sacred. But it is not his person. Nor is it the human person. It is he, this man, plain and simple.

Here is a passer-by in the street who has long arms, blue eyes, a mind with thoughts running through it that I am unaware of, but which are perhaps mediocre.

It is neither his person nor the human person in him which is sacred to
213 me. It is he. All of him. Arms, eyes, thoughts, everything. I would not damage any of it without infinite scruples.

If the human person in him were what was sacred to me, I could easily gouge out his eyes. Once blind, he will be a human person exactly as much as before. I would not have touched at all the human person in him. I would have destroyed only his eyes.

| Nor is it his person |

It is impossible to define respect for the human person. It is not only impossible to define in words. This is the case for many luminous ideas. But this idea cannot be conceived either; it cannot be defined or delimited by a silent operation of thought.

To take for a rule of public morality an idea impossible to define and conceive, is to give licence to every species of tyranny.

The concept of rights, launched across the world in 1789 was, due to its internal inadequacy, incapable of performing the function entrusted to it.

Amalgamating two inadequate ideas by speaking of the rights of the human person will take us no further.

What is it exactly that stops me from gouging out the eyes of this man if I have licence to do so and doing so amuses me?

Although he is sacred to me in his entirety, he is not sacred to me in every way or in all respects. He is not sacred to me insofar as his arms happen to be long, insofar as his eyes happen to be blue, insofar as his thoughts are perhaps mediocre. Nor, if he is a duke, insofar as he is a duke. Nor, if he is a ragman, insofar as he is a ragman. None of this would stay my hand.

What would stay my hand, is knowing that if someone gouged out his eyes, his soul would be rent by the thought that he was being hurt.

From the earliest childhood right to the grave, there is in the depths of the heart of every human being, something that, despite all experience of crimes committed, suffered and observed, expects invincibly that good and

not harm is done to him. It is this above all else that is sacred in every human being.

The good is the sole source of the sacred. There is nothing sacred but the 214
good and that which is related to the good.

This deep, childlike part of the heart that always expects good, is not what is at stake when demands are being made. The little boy who watches jealously whether his brother has not had a piece of cake a bit bigger than him yields to a motive coming from a much more superficial part of the soul. The word justice has two very different meanings which are related to these two parts of the soul. The first alone matters.

Every time that there arises in the depths of a human heart the childlike lament that Christ himself could not restrain, "Why am I being hurt?" there is clearly injustice. For if, as sometimes happens, this is only the result of a mistake, the injustice then consists in the inadequacy of the explanation.

Those who inflict the blows that provoke this cry |*obey*| yield to different motives depending on their temperament and depending on the moment. Some men find in some moments a sensual pleasure in this cry. Many are not aware that it is uttered. For it is a silent cry that sounds only in the secrecy of the heart.

These two states of mind are closer to each other than it seems. The second is but an attenuated mode of the first. This lack of awareness is indulgently maintained because it is gratifying |*the heart*| and it too contains a sensual pleasure. There are no other limits on our wills than the necessities of matter and the existence of other humans around us. Any imagined broadening of these limits is sensually pleasing, and there is thus sensual pleasure in everything that makes for forgetting the reality of obstacles. This is why upheavals, like war and civil war, which empty human existences of their reality, which seem to make marionettes of them, are so intoxicating. This is also why slavery is so pleasant to the masters.

In those who have suffered too many blows, like slaves, that part of the heart which is made to cry out in surprise by the harm inflicted seems dead. But it never is completely so. Only it can no longer cry out. It is settled into a state of muted and continuous keening.

But even in those in whom the capacity to cry is intact, this cry hardly manages to express itself inside or outside in coherent words. Most often, the words trying to translate it fall completely short.

This is all the less avoidable since those who most often have occasion to feel
215 that they are being hurt are those who least know how to speak. Nothing is more dreadful for example than seeing some unfortunate in court stammering before a magistrate who is making fine witticisms in elegant language.

The intelligence excepted, the only human faculty truly interested in public freedom of expression is that part of the heart that cries out against evil. But since it is incapable of expressing itself, freedom is of little use to it. First, public education must be such as to provide it, as much as possible, some means of expression. Thereafter there must be arrangements for the public expression of opinions, that are defined less by freedom than by an atmosphere of silence and attention where this faint and inept cry can make itself heard. Finally, there must be a system of institutions bringing as many men as possible to positions of authority who are capable and willing to hear it and to understand it.

It is clear that a party preoccupied with the capture or retention of governmental power cannot discern in these cries anything but noise. It will react differently depending on whether this noise impedes its own propaganda or, on the contrary, amplifies it. But in no case is it capable of a tender and intuitive attention needed for discerning the meaning in it.

It is to a lesser degree the same for the organisations that by contagion imitate the parties, that is to say, when public life is dominated by the contest of parties in all organisations, including, for example, the trade unions and even the churches.

Of course, the parties and similar organisations are just as much strangers to the scruples of the intelligence.

When freedom of expression in fact boils down to freedom of propaganda for organisations of this kind, the parts of the human soul which alone deserve to express themselves are not free to do so. Or they are so to an infinitesimal degree, barely more than in a totalitarian system.

And yet this is how it is in a democracy where the contest of parties regulates the distribution of power, that is in what we, the French, have up to now called democracy. For we know nothing else. It is therefore necessary to invent something else.

The same criterion, applied in an analogous manner to all public institutions, can lead to conclusions equally obvious.

The person is not what provides this criterion. The cry of painful surprise
216 that the infliction of harm arouses in the depths of the soul is not something

personal. An attack on the person and his desires is not enough to bring it out. It is always brought out by the feeling of a contact with injustice through pain. It always constitutes, for the least of men as for Christ, an impersonal protest.

There also very often arises cries of personal protest, but these are of no importance; one can provoke them as much as one wants without violating anything sacred.

What is sacred, far from being the person, is that which, in a human being, is impersonal.

All that is impersonal in man is sacred, and that alone.

In our age, when the writers and scientists have so oddly usurped the place of priests, the public accept, with a complaisance not founded on any reason, that the artistic and scientific faculties are sacred. This is generally considered obvious, though it is far from being so. When it is thought that a reason has to be given, it is claimed that the play of these faculties is among the highest forms of the flourishing of the human person.

Often, in fact, it is just that. In which case, it is easy to figure out what it costs and what it gets you.

It gets you attitudes toward life like the one, so common in our century, expressed by that horrible line by Blake, "It is better to smother an infant in its cradle than to hold back an unfulfilled desire."[3] Or such as the one that gave birth to the conception of the gratuitous act. It produces a science in which all possible species of norms, criteria and values are recognised, except the truth.

Gregorian chant, Romanesque churches, the *Iliad*, and the invention of geometry were not, for those beings through whom these things have passed to come all the way to us, occasions for flourishing.

The science, art, literature, and philosophy that are merely forms of flourishing of the person, constitute a domain where dazzling, glorious successes are accomplished, that make names live for thousands of years. But above this domain, far above, separated from it by a gulf, is another where the things of the first order are situated. These are essentially anonymous.

It is mere chance whether the names of those who have gained entry into 217
this domain are preserved or lost; even if preserved, they have entered into anonymity. Their person has disappeared.

3 This translates Weil's French which, however, distorts somewhat William Blake's original, "Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires", known as Proverb 67 of his "Proverbs of Hell" in the *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 1790.

Truth and beauty occupy this domain of impersonal and anonymous things. This is the one that is sacred. The other one not, or |*is not except as*| if it is, it is only as a spot of colour might, in a painting, represent a communion host.

What is sacred in science, is truth. What is sacred in art, is beauty. Truth and beauty are impersonal. This is all too obvious.

If a child is doing an addition and he makes a mistake, the error bears the mark of his person. If he proceeds in a perfectly correct way, his person is absent from the entire operation.

Perfection is impersonal. The person in us is the part in us of error and sin. All the effort of mystics has always been directed towards ensuring that there should no longer be any part in their soul that says, "I."

But the part of the soul that says, "we," is infinitely more dangerous still.

Passage into the impersonal takes place only through an attention of a rare quality which is possible only in solitude. Not only actual solitude, but mental solitude. It is never achieved in the one who thinks of himself as a member of a collectivity, as part of a "we."[4]

Men in collectivity do not have access to the impersonal even in its lower forms. A group of human beings cannot even add up. Adding up takes place in a mind that forgets for that moment that any other mind exists.

The personal is opposed to the impersonal, but there is passage from the one to the other. There is no passage from the |*personal*| collective to the impersonal. A collectivity must first dissolve into separate persons before entry into the impersonal is possible.

In this sense only, the person has a greater involvement in the sacred than the collectivity.

Not only is the collectivity foreign to the sacred, but it leads away from it by offering a false imitation.

The error that attributes a sacred character to the collectivity is idolatry; it is in all times, in all countries, the most widespread crime. One in whose
218 eyes only the flourishing of the person counts has completely lost the very sense of the sacred. It is difficult to know which of the two errors is worse.

4 The word 'collectivité' is somewhat unusual in French as is 'collectivity' in English. French has words for a community, a collective, and for a group or a grouping. Collectivity is a noun formed from the adjective collective and must at least refer to a group whose members think of themselves as being joined together into a composite in some way.

Often they combine in the same mind in varying proportions. But the second error has much less energy and duration than the first.

From the spiritual point of view, the struggle between Germany of 1940 and France of 1940 was not principally a struggle between barbarism and civilisation, nor between evil and good, but between the first error and the second. The victory of the first is not surprising; the first is in itself the stronger.

The subordination of the person to the collectivity is not a scandal, it is a fact belonging to the order of mechanical facts, like that of the gram to the kilogram on a scale. The person is always in fact subject to the collectivity, up to and including what is called his flourishing.

For example, it is precisely the artists and writers most inclined to regard their art as the flourishing of their person who are in fact most subject to public taste. Hugo found no difficulty in reconciling the cult of self with his role as a "sonorous echo". Examples like Wilde, Gide or the surrealists are still more clear. Scientists in the same situation are also subservient to fashion, which has even more power over science than over the shape of hats. The collective opinion of experts is almost sovereign over every one of them.

Since the person is in fact and by the nature of things subject to the collective, there are no natural rights in relation to it.

It is correct to say that antiquity did not have the idea of the respect due to the person. They were thinking much too clearly for so confused a conception.

| *Antiquity had instead* |

The human being escapes the collective only by rising beyond the personal so as to enter into the impersonal. At that moment there is something in him, a small part of his soul, upon which nothing of the collective can have a hold. If he can root himself in the impersonal good, that is to say, become capable of drawing some energy from it, he is in a position, every time he thinks he has an obligation to do so, to bring to bear a force undoubtedly small, but real, against any collectivity whatsoever, without relying upon any other.

There are occasions where an almost infinitesimal force is decisive. A collectivity is much stronger than a lone man; but to exist, every collectivity needs operations, of which addition is the elementary example, which can only be accomplished within a mind in a state of solitude. 219

This need offers the possibility of a |*influence*| hold for the impersonal over the collective, if only one knew how to investigate a method for making use of it.

Every one of those who has crossed into the domain of the impersonal finds there a responsibility toward all human beings. That of protecting in them, not the person, but all the fragile possibilities of passage into the impersonal which the person obscures.

Those are the first to whom the appeal for respect toward the sacred character of human beings should be addressed. For such an appeal to have a chance, it must be addressed to beings capable of hearing it.

It is useless to explain to a collectivity that within each of the units composing it there is something it must not violate. First, a collectivity is not someone, other than by a fiction; it has no existence, other than abstract; speaking to it is a fictitious operation. Second, if it were someone, it would be someone who was not disposed to respect anything but itself.

Furthermore, the greatest danger is not the tendency of the collective to reduce the person, but the tendency of the person to rush into, to lose itself in the collective. Or perhaps the first danger is only the visible and deceptive appearance of the second.

If it is useless to tell the collectivity that the person is sacred, it is also useless to tell the person that he is himself sacred. He cannot believe it. He does not feel sacred. What prevents the person from feeling sacred is that in actual fact he is not.

If there are beings whose consciousness testifies to something else, to whom their own person gives a certain feeling of sacredness that they think they can, by generalising, attribute to every person, they are under a double illusion.

What they experience is not the authentic feeling of the sacred, but that false imitation of it that the collective produces. If they experience it sometimes in connection with their own person, this is because their person partakes of the collective prestige through the social recognition it happens to be in the centre of.

Thus it is by an error that they think they can generalise. Although this erroneous generalising proceeds from a generous impulse, it cannot have enough inherent power such that in their eyes anonymous human matter
220 really ceases to be anonymous human matter. But it is difficult for them to have the opportunity to realise this, since they have no contact with it.

In man, the person is a thing in distress, that is cold, that runs about seeking refuge and warmth.

That is unknown to those in whom the person is, even if only in expectation, warmly enveloped by social recognition.

This is why personalist philosophy has come to life and spread not within popular circles, but within the circles of writers who, by profession, have or hope to acquire a name and a reputation.

The relations between the collectivity and the person must be established with the sole purpose of removing that which is liable to prevent the growth and mysterious germination of the impersonal part of the soul.

This requires, on the one hand, that each person have some space, some free time at their disposal, some possibilities for passing to ever higher degrees of attention, some solitude, and some silence. At the same time, the person must be in warmth, so that distress does not cause the person to lose itself in the collective.

If such is the good, it seems difficult to go much further in the direction of evil than modern society, even a democratic one. Notably, a modern factory might not be very far from the limit of horror. Each human being there is continually harried, prodded by the intervention of others' wills, and at the same time the soul is in the cold, in distress and abandoned. Man needs warm silence, one gives him an icy tumult.

Physical work, though it is a burden, is not in itself a degradation. It is not art; it is not science; but it is something else that has a value absolutely equal to that of art and science. For it affords an equal possibility for entry into an impersonal form of attention.

Gouging out the eyes of a teenage Watteau and making him turn a grindstone would not have been a greater crime than putting a young boy who has the vocation for that kind of work onto piecework on an assembly line or operating a machine. Except that this vocation, unlike that of painter, is not discernible.

Exactly to the same extent as art and science, albeit in a different way, physical work is a certain contact with the reality, the truth, the beauty of this universe, and with the eternal wisdom that gives it order.

This is why to demean work is a sacrilege in exactly the sense that trampling on a host is a sacrilege. 221

If those who work felt this, if they felt that by the very fact that they are victims of it they are in a sense accomplices to it, their resistance would have

a wholly different fervour than the one the thought of their person and their rights can provide. This would not be a claim of entitlement; it would be a revolt of the entire being, fierce and desperate like that of a young girl being forced into a brothel; and it would simultaneously be a cry of hope coming from the depths of the heart.

This feeling is present in them, but is so inarticulate that it is indiscernible even to themselves. Professional masters of words are quite incapable of providing them with its expression.

When speaking to them about their own situation, one generally chooses to speak to them of salaries. They, under the fatigue that overwhelms them and turns all effort of attention into a pain, welcome with relief the easy clarity of numbers.

They thus overlook that the object over which they are bargaining, which they complain they are forced to hand over at a discount, which they are refused a fair price for, is nothing other than their soul.

Let us imagine that as the devil is in the process of buying the soul of some unfortunate, someone taking pity on the unfortunate, intervenes in the discussion and says to the devil, "It is shameful on your part to offer such a price, the item is worth at least double that."

This is the sinister farce that the workers movement has performed, with its unions, its parties, and its left-wing intellectuals.

This spirit of bargaining was already implicit in the concept of rights that the people of 1789 had imprudently put at the centre of the appeal they sought to proclaim to the whole world. This was to destroy its inherent power in advance.

The concept of rights is tied to that of division, of exchange, of quantity. There is something commercial about it. It is evocative of the legal process, of legal pleadings. Rights are only asserted in a tone of demand; and when this tone is adopted, it is because force is not far behind, to reinforce it, since without that it is ridiculous.

There are a number of concepts, all located in the same category, that are, in themselves, completely alien to the supernatural, yet are a bit above brute force. They are all related to the customs of the collective beast, to employ
222 Plato's language, when it retains some traces of a training imposed by the supernatural operation of grace. When the traces are not being continually renewed by a renewing of this operation, when they are mere remnants of it, these concepts become by necessity subject to the caprice of the beast.

The concepts of rights, of person, of democracy are in this category. Bernanos had the courage to observe that democracy offers no defence against dictators. The person is by nature subject to the collectivity. Rights are by nature dependent on force. The lies and errors that veil these truths are extremely dangerous, because they impede recourse to that which alone is exempt from force and protects against it; that is to say a different force, which is the radiance of spirit. Heavy matter is not capable of ascending against gravity except in plants, through the energy of the sun that the green of the leaves has captured and that operates within the sap. Gravity and death will reclaim, gradually but inexorably, the plant deprived of light.

Among these lies is that of natural rights, launched by the materialist 18th century. Not by Rousseau, who was a lucid, powerful mind, and in inspiration truly Christian, but by Diderot and the circles around the *Encyclopedia*.

The concept of rights comes to us from Rome, and, like all that comes from ancient Rome, which is the woman full of names of blasphemy spoken of in the *Apocalypse*, it is pagan and not baptisable.[5] The Romans who, like Hitler, had understood that force has its full effectiveness only when clothed in some ideas, employed the concept of rights to this end. It lends itself very well to it. One accuses modern Germany of disregarding it. But Germany used it to the full in its demands as a proletarian nation. It does not recognise, it is true, any right in those that it subjugates other than that of obeying. So too Ancient Rome.

To praise ancient Rome for having bequeathed to us the concept of rights is singularly scandalous. For if one wants to look to Rome for what this concept was in its cradle, in order to identify its type, one sees that property was defined by the right to use and abuse. And as a matter of fact most of those things which any owner had the right to use and abuse were human beings.

The Greeks did not have the concept of rights. They did not have the words to express it. They were content with the name of justice.

It was a singular confusion that enabled assimilating the unwritten law of Antigone to that of natural right. In the eyes of Creon, there was absolutely 223
nothing natural in what Antigone did. He judged her mad.

It is not we who could prove him wrong, we who, at this moment, think, speak and act exactly like him. This can be verified by consulting the text.

5 Rv 17:3; which Weil misremembers, as it is the beast that is full of names. The *Apocalypse* is a French title for the Book of Revelations.

Antigone says to Creon, "It is not Zeus who issued this edict; it is not the companion of the deities of the other world, Justice, who has established such laws among men."[6] Creon tries to convince her that his orders were just; he accuses her of having dishonoured one of her brothers by honouring the other, since then the same honour has been accorded to the impious and to the faithful, to the one who died trying to destroy his own country and to the one who died to defend it.

She says, "Nonetheless the other world demands the same laws." He objects with good sense, "But the shares are not the same for the true and the traitor." She finds only this absurd response, "Who knows if in the other world that is legitimate?"[7]

Creon's observation is perfectly reasonable, "But an enemy, even after he is dead, is never a friend." But the little fool replies, "I was born to share, not in hate, but in love."[8]

Then Creon, ever more reasonable, "Go then to the other world, and since you must love, love those who live down there."[9]

In fact, that was indeed her true place. For the unwritten law this little girl was obeying, far from having anything in common with any right, or with anything natural, was nothing other than the extreme, absurd love, which drove Christ onto the cross.

Justice, companion of the deities of the other world, prescribes this excessiveness of love. No right would call for it. Rights have no direct link with love.

Just as the concept of rights is foreign to the Greek mind, it is also foreign to the Christian inspiration, wherever it is pure, not mixed with Roman, Hebraic, or Aristotelian heritage. One cannot imagine Saint Francis of Assisi speaking of rights.

If one says to someone who is capable of hearing, "What you are doing to me is not just," one might touch and awaken the spirit of attention and love at its source. It is not the same with words like, "I have the right to . . .", "You do not have the right to . . ."; they contain a latent war and awaken a spirit
224 of war. The concept of rights, placed at the centre of social conflicts, makes impossible any hint of charity on either side.

6 Sophocles, *Antigone*, lines 450–1.
7 *Antigone*, 519–521.
8 *Antigone*, 522–523.
9 *Antigone*, 524–525.

It is impossible, when one makes almost exclusive use of the concept of rights, to keep one's eyes fixed on the true problem. A peasant in a market who is unduly pressured by a buyer to get him to sell his eggs at a moderate price, can very well respond, "I have the right to keep my eggs if no one offers me a good enough price." But a young girl who is being forced into a brothel will not speak of her rights. In such a situation, this word would seem ridiculous by its inadequacy.

This is why the social crisis, which is analogous to the second situation, has through the use of this word, falsely appeared analogous to the first.

The use of this word turned, what should have been a cry erupting from the depths of one's bowels, into a bitter clamour of demands, without purity or efficacy.

The concept of rights, by the very fact of its mediocrity, inherently carries in its wake the concept of the person, for rights are related to personal things. They are located on this level.

Adding to the word right the word person, so as to imply the right of a person to what is called flourishing, would cause a harm still more serious. The cry of the oppressed would descend even lower than the tone of demands, it would take on the tone of envy.

Since the person flourishes only when social prestige inflates it; its flourishing is a social privilege. One does not tell the masses this when speaking to them about the rights of the person, one tells them the opposite. They do not have sufficient analytical ability to recognise this clearly for themselves; but they feel it, their daily experience makes them certain of it.

It cannot be for them a reason to reject this slogan. In our age of hazy intelligence, one has no difficulty in demanding for all an equal share of privileges, of things whose very essence is privilege. It is a kind of demand at once absurd and base; absurd, because privilege is by definition unequal; base, because it is not worth being desired.

But the class of men who put demands and indeed everything else into words, who have the monopoly on language, is a class of the privileged. It is not they who will say that privilege is not worth being desired. They do not 225
think it. But more importantly, saying so would be indecent for them.

Many truths which are indispensable and might save men are not said for a reason of this kind; those who could say them cannot put them into words, those who could put them into words cannot say them. The remedy for this evil would be one of the pressing problems of a true politics.

In an unstable society, the privileged have a bad conscience. Some hide it with an air of defiance and tell the masses, "It is quite proper that you do not have privileges and that I do have them." Others tell them with an air of goodwill, "I demand for all of you an equal share of the privileges I possess."

The first attitude is odious. The second lacks common sense. It is also too easy.

Both spur the people to run onto the path of evil, to move away from their single and true good, which is not in their hands, but which, in one sense, is so close to them. They are much closer to an authentic good, which would be a source of beauty, truth, joy and abundance, than are those who give them their pity. But as they are not there and do not know how to get there, everything happens as if it were infinitely far from them. Those who speak for them, to them, are equally incapable of understanding both what distress they are in and what abundance of good lies almost within their reach. And for the people, it is essential for them that they be understood.

Affliction is of itself inarticulate. The afflicted silently plead that they be given words to express themselves. There are times when they are not answered. There are others when they are given words, but badly chosen, for those who choose them are strangers to the affliction that they are interpreting.

They are far from it most often because of where circumstances have placed them. But even if they are close to affliction or have been deep in it for a period of their life, even recently, they are nonetheless strangers to it, because they made themselves strangers to it as soon as they could.

Thought resists thinking about affliction just as much as living flesh resists death. A stag advancing voluntarily, step by step to present itself to the teeth of the pack is about as possible as an act of attention directed upon a real and immediate affliction, on the part of a mind that has the capacity to avoid it.

That which, being essential to the good, is by nature impossible, is always possible supernaturally.

226 Supernatural good is not a kind of supplement to natural good as, with Aristotle's help, one would like to persuade us for our greater comfort. It would be pleasing if it were so, but it is not so. In all the heart-rending problems of human existence, the choice is solely between supernatural good and evil.

Putting into the mouth of the afflicted words that belong to the intermediate region of values, such as democracy, rights or person, is to give them a

present that has no potential to bring them any good and that inevitably does them much harm.

These notions do not have a place in heaven, they are suspended in mid-air, and for that very reason they are incapable of getting a grip on earth.

Only the light that falls continuously from heaven gives a tree the energy to sink powerful roots deep into the earth. The tree is in truth rooted in heaven.

Only that which comes from heaven has the potential of actually making a mark on the earth.

If one wants to arm the afflicted effectively, one must put in their mouths only words whose proper abode is in heaven, over in heaven, in the other world. There is no need to fear that this is impossible. Affliction disposes the soul to receive eagerly, to drink all that comes from that place. It is the suppliers, not the consumers, of this kind of product who are missing.

The criterion for the choice of words is easy to recognise and to apply. The afflicted, submerged in woe, aspire to the good. One must give them only the words that express solely the good, the good in its pure state. Distinguishing them is easy. Words which can be combined with something that designates an evil are foreign to pure good. One is expressing a reproach when saying, "He puts his person first." The person is therefore foreign to the good. One can speak of an abuse of democracy. Democracy is therefore foreign to the good. Possession of a right implies the possibility of making a good or bad use of it. Rights are therefore foreign to the good. By contrast the fulfilment of an obligation is a good always, everywhere. Truth, beauty, 227
justice, and compassion are good always, everywhere.

To be sure that one says the right thing when it comes to the aspirations of the afflicted, it is enough to limit oneself to words and phrases that express always, everywhere, in any circumstance, solely the good.

This is one of the only two services one can render them with words. The other is to find words that express the truth of their affliction; that, amidst external circumstances, renders perceptible the cry always uttered in silence, "Why am I being hurt?"

For this they should not count on men of talent, on personalities, celebrities, or even men of genius in the sense in which one ordinarily uses the word genius, where its use is confused with that of the word talent. They can count only on geniuses of the very first order, the poet of the *Iliad*, Aeschylus,

Sophocles, Shakespeare as he was when he wrote *Lear*, Racine as he was when he wrote *Phèdre*. That is not a large number.

But there are many human beings, who, being badly or poorly endowed by nature, seem infinitely inferior not only to Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, or Racine, but also to Virgil, Corneille, or Hugo; who nevertheless live in the kingdom of impersonal goods which the latter have not entered.

A village idiot, in the literal sense of the word, who genuinely loves the truth, even though he might only ever come out with stammerings, is in thought infinitely superior to Aristotle. He is infinitely closer to Plato than Aristotle ever was. He has genius, instead of Aristotle where the word talent is alone appropriate. If a fairy came to him offering to change his lot for a destiny analogous to that of Aristotle, it would be wise for him to refuse without hesitation. But he knows nothing of this. No one tells him. Everyone tells him the opposite. It is necessary that he be told. It is necessary to encourage idiots, people without talent, people of mediocre or hardly better than average talent, who have genius. There is no need to fear making them prideful. Love of truth is always accompanied by humility. Real genius is nothing other than the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought.

Instead of encouraging the flourishing of talents, as was proposed in 1789, it is the growth of genius that must be cherished and revived with a tender respect; for only truly pure heroes, the saints and the geniuses can be a help to the afflicted. Between these two, the people of talent, intelligence, energy, character, and strong personality form a screen and impede
228 the help. No harm should be done to the screen, but it must be put aside gently, so as to make it as unnoticeable as possible. And, one must break the far more dangerous screen of the collective, by eliminating any part of our institutions and our morals where there is any form of partisanship. Neither personalities nor parties ever give a hearing either to truth or to affliction.

There is a natural alliance between truth and affliction, because both are mute supplicants, eternally condemned to remain voiceless before us.

Like a vagrant, accused in magistrate's court of having taken a carrot from a field, standing before the judge, who, comfortably seated, elegantly strings together questions, comments and witticisms, while the other cannot even manage to stammer; so stands truth before an intelligence busy with elegantly lining up opinions.

Language, even in the man who appears silent, is always that which formulates opinions. The natural faculty called intelligence is related to opinions and to language. Language states relations. But it states only a few of them, because it unfolds in time. If it is confused, vague, not that rigorous, and without order, if the mind that utters it or that hears it has a limited capacity to keep a thought present in mind, then it is empty or nearly empty of any real content of relations. If it is perfectly clear, precise, rigorous, and ordered; if it addresses a mind which, having conceived a thought, is capable of keeping it present while it conceives another, of keeping these two present while it conceives a third, and so on; in this case, language can be relatively rich in relations. But like all riches, this relative richness is an atrocious poverty, compared to the perfection which alone is desirable.

Even at its best, a mind confined within language is in prison. Its limit is the number of relations that words can make present to its mind at the same time. It remains in ignorance of thoughts involving the combination of a greater number of relations; these thoughts are outside language, not formulable, despite being perfectly rigorous and clear and despite each one of the relations composing them being expressible in perfectly precise words. Thus the mind moves within a confined space of partial truth, which may be more or less large, without ever being able to take a look at what is outside.

If a captive mind is unaware of its own captivity, it lives in error. If it has 229
recognised this, even for a tenth of a second, and it has hastened to forget it so as not to suffer, it sojourns in deceit. Men of extremely brilliant intelligence can be born, live and die in error and deceit. In those men intelligence is not a good, not even an advantage. The difference between more and less intelligent men is like the difference between criminals condemned to solitary imprisonment for life whose cells might be more or less large. An intelligent man proud of his intelligence is like a convict who would be proud to have a large cell.

A mind that senses its captivity would like to disguise it from itself. But if it abhors falsehood it will not do so. It will then have to suffer much. It will batter itself against the wall until it passes out; will wake up, will look at the wall with fear, then one day will start again and will pass out once more; and so on, without end, without any hope. One day it will wake up on the other side of the wall.

It is perhaps still captive, only within a more spacious setting. What then is the difference? It possesses from now on the key, the secret that topples all walls. It is outside of what men call intelligence, it is there where wisdom begins.

Any mind confined by language is capable only of opinions. Any mind that has become capable of grasping thoughts inexpressible due to the multitude of relationships combined in it, yet more rigorous and more luminous than that expressed by the most precise language, any mind arrived at this point dwells already in the truth. Certainty and faith outside any shadow of doubt are its own. And it matters little whether it had originally little or much intelligence, whether it had been in a narrow or wide cell. What alone matters is that having arrived at the end of its own intelligence, such as it was, it has passed beyond. A village idiot is as close to the truth as a child prodigy. Both are separated from it only by a wall. One does not enter into the truth without having passed through one's own annihilation, without having sojourned long in a state of extreme and total humiliation.

It is the same obstacle that blocks the knowledge of affliction. As truth is something other than |*suffering*| opinion, affliction is something other than suffering. Affliction is a mechanism to grind the soul; the man who is caught
230 in it is like a factory worker drawn into the teeth of a machine. He is nothing but a torn and bloody thing.

The degree and nature of the suffering that constitutes affliction in the strict sense differs greatly between human beings. It depends mainly on the quantity of vital energy possessed at the starting point and on the attitude adopted in the face of suffering.

Human thought cannot recognise the reality of affliction. Should someone recognises the reality of affliction, he must say to himself, "A play of circumstances that I do not control can strip me of anything at all at any moment, including all these things that are so much my own that I consider them as being myself. There is nothing in me that I cannot lose. An accident can at any moment dismantle what I am and put in its place any vile and contemptible thing."

To think this with one's whole soul, is to experience nothingness. It is the state of extreme and total humiliation that is also the condition for the passage into truth. It is a death of the soul. This is why the sight of naked affliction occasions in the soul the same withdrawing that the proximity of death occasions in the flesh.

One thinks of the dead with piety when one evokes them only with the mind, or when one visits graves, or when one sees them suitably arranged on a bed. But the sight of corpses which are as if discarded on the battlefield,

with a look at once sinister and grotesque, causes horror. Death appears naked, unclothed, and the flesh shivers.

Affliction, when distance, whether material or mental, permits seeing it only in a vague, confused way, without distinguishing it from mere suffering, inspires a tender pity in the souls of the generous. But when an arbitrary set of circumstance causes it suddenly somewhere to be revealed naked, as being something that destroys, a mutilation or a leprosy of the soul, one shivers and one recoils. And the afflicted themselves experience the same shudder of horror when facing themselves.

To listen to someone is to put oneself in his place while he speaks. To put oneself in the place of a being whose soul is mutilated by affliction or in imminent danger of being so is to annihilate one's own soul. It is more difficult than suicide would be for a child living happily. So the afflicted are not heard. They are in the state of someone whose tongue has been cut out and who at times forgets his impairment. His lips move and no sound strikes the ears. They themselves are quickly rendered powerless in the use of language 231
by the certainty of not being heard.

This is why there is no hope for the vagrant standing before the judge. If something heartrending comes through his stammering, which pierces the soul, this will be heard neither by the magistrate nor the spectators. It is a mute cry. And the afflicted among them are also almost always deaf to each other. And each afflicted, under the strain of general indifference, tries through deception or mindlessness to make himself deaf to himself.

Only the supernatural operation of grace makes the soul pass through its own annihilation to the place where it gathers the kind of attention that alone enables being attentive to truth and affliction. It is the same kind for both of them. It is an attention intense, pure, with no motive, freely given, and generous. And this attention is love.

Because affliction and truth need the same attention to be heard, the spirit of justice and the spirit of truth are but one. The spirit of justice and of truth is nothing other than a certain kind of attention, which is that of pure love.

By an eternal disposition of Providence, everything a man produces when the spirit of justice and truth govern him, in any domain, is vested with the radiance of beauty.

Beauty is the supreme mystery here below. It is a radiance that solicits the attention, but does not give it any motivation for lingering. Beauty always promises and never gives; it arouses a hunger, but there is no nourishment

in it for the part of the soul that tries to satisfy that hunger here below; it has nourishment only for the part of the soul that looks. It arouses desire, and it makes it clearly felt that there is nothing in it to desire, since one wants above all that nothing about it change. If one does not look for expedients to get out the delightful torment it inflicts, desire is transformed little by little into love, and is formed into a seed of the faculty of freely given and pure attention.

As much as affliction is ugly, that much the true expression of affliction is supremely beautiful. One can give as examples, even in recent centuries, *Phèdre*, *The School for Wives*, *Lear*, the poems of Villon; but even more so the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles; still more the *Iliad*, the Book of Job, certain folk poems; and even more so still the stories of the Passion in the Gospels. The radiance of beauty is spread over affliction by the light of the spirit of
232 justice and love, which alone allows a human thought to look upon affliction and reproduce it like it is.

Also, every time that a fragment of inexpressible truth passes into words that, though unable to contain the truth that has inspired them, have, through their arrangement, so perfect a correspondence with it, they provide a support to any mind desirous of finding it; whenever this is so, a radiance of beauty is spread over the words.

All that proceeds from pure love is illuminated by the radiance of beauty.

Beauty is perceptible, though very dimly and mixed with many false imitations, inside the cell where all human thought is first imprisoned. Truth and justice with tongues cut out cannot hope for any but beauty's help. It has no language either; it does not speak; it says nothing. But it has a voice to beckon. It beckons and shows justice and truth, who have no voice. Like a dog barking to make people come to his master who lies lifeless in the snow.

Justice, truth, and beauty are sisters and allies. With three words so beautiful there is no need to look for others.

Justice consists in being vigilant that harm should not be done to men. Harm is done to a human being when he cries inwardly, "Why is it that I am being hurt?"[10] He is often mistaken when he tries to understand what harm

10 In French, hurting and harming are not neatly distinguished by the language. English places limitations on when each term can be used. The translation has had to vary the translation to distinguish the experience of being hurt and the condition of being harmed.

he suffers, who inflicts it on him, why it is being inflicted on him. But the cry is infallible.

The other cry so often heard, "Why does another have more than me?" is related to rights. One must learn to distinguish the two cries and to silence the second as much as one can, with the least possible brutality, aided by a civil code, ordinary tribunals and the police. To train minds capable of resolving problems situated in this domain, the Law School suffices.

But the cry, "Why am I being hurt?" poses altogether different problems, for which the spirit of truth, justice and love is indispensable.

In every human soul there continually arises the appeal that no harm be done to it. The text of the *Our Father* addresses this appeal to God. But God has the power to protect from harm only the eternal part of the soul entered into real and direct contact with him. The rest of the soul, and the entire soul in anyone who has not received the grace of real and direct contact with God, is abandoned to the wills of men and the accident of 233
circumstances.

Thus it is for men to be vigilant that harm should not be done to men.

Someone who is being hurt has evil actually penetrate him; not only pain, suffering, but the very horror of evil. As men have the power to pass good onto one another, they also have the power to pass on evil. One can pass evil onto a human being by flattering him, by providing him with comforts, pleasures; but most often men pass evil onto men by hurting them.

Eternal Wisdom, however, does not leave the human soul wholly at the mercy of chance events and the will of men. Evil inflicted on a human being from outside in the form of a wound inflames the desire for good and thereby automatically creates the possibility of a remedy. When the wound has penetrated deeply, the good desired is the perfectly pure good. The part of the soul that asks, "Why am I being hurt?" is the deep part which in every human being, even the most defiled, has remained since earliest childhood perfectly intact and perfectly innocent.

To safeguard justice, to protect men from all evil, means first of all preventing harm being done to them. As for those who have been hurt, this means removing the material consequences, placing the victims in a situation where the wound, if it has not pierced too far, may heal naturally through well-being. But for those in whom the wound has rent the whole soul, it means additionally and above all slaking their thirst by giving them some perfectly pure good to drink.

There may be an obligation to inflict harm to awaken this thirst in order then to quench it. This is what punishment is about. Those who have become strangers to the good to the point of seeking to spread evil around them cannot be restored to the good except through the infliction of harm. It must be inflicted on them up to the point of awakening deep inside them the perfectly innocent voice which says with astonishment, "Why am I being hurt?" This innocent part of the criminal's soul must receive nourishment and it must grow, until it constitutes itself into a tribunal within the soul, to judge past crimes, to condemn them, and eventually, with the help of
234 grace, to pardon them. The operation of punishment is then completed; the offender is restored to the good, and must be publicly and solemnly restored to the city.

Punishment is nothing other than this. Even capital punishment, though it precludes restoration to the city in the literal sense, must not be anything else. Punishment is solely a procedure for giving pure good to men who do not desire it; the art of punishing is the art of awakening in criminals the desire for pure good through pain or even through death.

But we have completely lost even the idea of punishment. We no longer know that it consists in providing the good. For us it stops at the infliction of harm. That is why there is one thing and one thing only in modern society more hideous even than crime, and that is punitive justice.

To make the idea of punitive justice the central motive for the war effort and the revolt against the occupiers is more dangerous than anyone can imagine. It is necessary to use fear to reduce the criminal activity of cowards; but it is dreadful to make punitive justice, as we conceive it today in our ignorance, the motive of heroes.

Whenever a man of today speaks of punishment, penalising, and retribution, of justice in the punitive sense, he is talking about only the basest vengeance.

This treasure of suffering and violent death that Christ took for himself and which he offers so often to those he loves, we make so little of it that we throw it at beings who are the most vile in our eyes, knowing that they will make no use of it and having no intention of helping them find a use for it.

For criminals, true punishment; for the afflicted in whom affliction has gnawed into the depth of the soul, help capable of leading them to quench their thirst at supernatural springs; for all the others, a little comfort, much beauty, and protection against those who would harm them; everywhere,

the rigorous restriction of the tumult of lies, propaganda and opinions, the establishment of a silence where truth can germinate and ripen; this is what is owed to men.

To ensure this for men, one can only count on those beings who have passed to the other side of a certain limit. One will say that they are too few. They are probably rare, and yet they cannot be counted up; most are hidden. Pure good is sent from heaven here below only in imperceptible quantities, whether in an individual soul, or in society. "The mustard grain is the smallest of grains."[11] Proserpine ate just a single grain of pomegranate. 235
A pearl buried at the bottom of a field is not visible. One does not notice the leavening mixed in the dough.

But just as with catalysts or bacteria in chemical reactions, of which leavening is an example, so too in human affairs the imperceptible grains of pure good operate in a decisive way by their mere presence, if they are put in the right place.

How to put them in the right place?

Much would be accomplished if among those who are responsible for showing the public the things to praise, to admire, to hope for, to strive for, to ask for, some at least resolved in their hearts to spurn absolutely and without exception all that is not pure good, perfection, truth, justice, and love.

More would be done if most of those who today hold the fragments of spiritual authority felt the obligation never to offer anything as aspirations for men but real and perfectly pure good.

When one speaks of the power of words, it is always a matter of a power of illusion and error. But, due to a providential disposition, there are certain words which, if put to good use, have in themselves the inherent power of illuminating and elevating towards the good. These are the words which correspond to a perfection absolute and for us ungraspable. The inherent power of illuminating and drawing upwards lies in these words themselves, in these words as such, not in any conception. Indeed putting them to good use is above all not making them correspond to any conception. What they express is inconceivable.

God and truth are such words. Also justice, love, and good.

Words such as these are dangerous to employ. Their use is an ordeal. For to put them to legitimate use, they must simultaneously not be enclosed within any human conception and be joined to conceptions and actions

11 Mt 13:32 and Mk 4:31.

directly and exclusively inspired by their light. Otherwise they are quickly recognised by all as being lies.

They are uncomfortable companions. Words like rights, democracy and person are more convenient. For this reason they are naturally preferable in the eyes of those who, even with good intentions, have assumed public office. Public office has no importance other than the possibility of doing good for men, and those who assume it with good intention want to spread
236 good among their contemporaries; but they generally make the mistake of believing that they themselves will be able to buy it at a discount first.

The words of the intermediate region, rights, democracy, person, are in good use in their region, that of the intermediate institutions. The inspiration from which all institutions proceed, and of which they are like a projection, calls for another language.

The subordination of the person to the collective is in the nature of things like that of the gram to the kilogram on a scales. But a scales can be such that the kilogram yields to the gram. It is enough that one of the arms be more than a thousand times longer than the other. The law of equilibrium is sovereign over the inequalities of weight. But the lower weight will never outweigh the higher weight without a relationship between them in which the law of equilibrium is crystallised.

Likewise the person can only be protected against the collective, and democracy secured, by a crystallisation in public life of the higher good, which is impersonal and without relation to any political structure.

The word person, it is true, is often applied to God. But in the passage where Christ proposes God himself to men as the model of a perfection that they are commanded to attain, he does not join it only to the image of a person, but most of all to that of an impersonal order, "Become the sons of your Father, the one from the heavens, in that he makes his sun to rise over the wicked and the good and his rain to fall upon the just and the unjust."[12]

This impersonal and divine order of the universe has as its images among us justice, truth, beauty. Nothing less than these things is worthy to serve as inspiration to men who accept dying.

Above the institutions designed to protect rights, persons, and democratic liberties, others must be invented designed to identify and abolish all that

12 Mt 5:45.

which, in contemporary life, |*overwhelms souls*| crushes souls under injustice, mendacity and ugliness.

They must be invented, for they are unknown, and it is impossible to doubt they are needed.

Oeuvres complètes V:1

Written in London in 1943, posthumously published under the title "La personne et le sacré" and in an earlier translation as "Human Personality", this essay was one of several that accompanied the writing of Weil's second magnum opus, *The Need for Roots* (*L'Enracinement*)—also published posthumously. Her incisive critique of the relative importance of personal individuality and the idea of rights, the essay is perhaps the best conspectus of Weil's mature thought. It illustrates her strength in moving between arresting, concrete examples and the heights of metaphysical abstractions.

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Part 2

MEDIATION

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PREFACE TO PART 2
Mediation

The world here below, the world of matter, living or otherwise, is what Simone Weil designated existence rather than pure being. What exists or has existence, is what first comes into being, then undergoes changes over time, before ceasing to be. By contrast, what is, what has being *without* being in existence, is outside time, unchanging and everlasting. This which is beyond nature is the supernatural. The very nature of existence, for Weil, is order, the natural order of things. What happens here below happens of necessity and in accord with the order of time: Plants never start fully grown and regress into seeds; burnt ash never becomes wood again; consequences never precede their causes. Since this order which is so manifest in existence is unchanging, it is supernatural and outside time. In this sense it does not exist, yet is nonetheless manifest in existence. Weil would say perhaps that the supernatural mediates existence, undoubtedly that it gives it order. These manifestations of the supernatural in our world, in existence, are intermediaries. They lie between the natural and the supernatural. The texts in Part 2 concern the nature of these intermediaries and the extent to which humans can apprehend or even make use of them.

The supernatural, being beyond nature, is as distant and as different from existence as it is possible to be. Though the difference is infinite there is yet a *connection* between natural and supernatural. These points of connection, these relations, are a mediation between the natural and the supernatural; that mediation is, under the right conditions, apprehensible by human beings. Weil believes that the various aspects of this mediation, each of which is an intermediary, are together a kind of ladder leading to contact with the

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supernatural, with what is "beyond the sky." In one sense, what is beyond the sky, being unchanging and timeless, is ultimate reality—that is, what is really real, as we might say by straining language.

One way, for example, a person can ascend to contact with reality is through work, especially bodily labour.[1] Work is what we do for the sake of some purpose other than that of the work itself. Success in realising our purposes requires some understanding of the necessity in the natural order. Human skills, techniques and technology are all methods for using the natural order for our purposes so that these purposes are realised naturally, automatically, necessarily, according to the order of matter in nature. For example, using leverage and levers is part of an intuitive skill we possess by which the natural order is used to magnify our physical strength. Leverage as part of the natural order can also be understood through the ratios or relations between the lengths of a lever to either side of the fulcrum (or bearing point). A lever is real, but so is the principle of leverage, and in this way so are those ratios. That relationship, which the ratios show, is always and everywhere the same, and unchanging. It is an aspect of the supernatural within the natural world's order. So when someone learns to use a lever or intuits how to increase his leverage using the position of his body, he is moving toward contact with reality under the aspect of leverage. When his understanding also includes the relationship of ratios in levers, perhaps calculating an ideal position for the fulcrum to fit his work, he has moved another step closer to reality and its underlying order. In this way, leverage is an apprehensible intermediary of the supernatural, one whose apprehension moves one towards the origin of the necessity in existence. Thus contact with an intermediary, that is to say with mediation generally, is a contact by proxy with the supernatural.

It is this possibility, the possibility of mediation, that is the core of Weil's philosophy. It is central to her conception of human beings as progressive, as creatures who can be improved if only they fulfil their potential for contact and accord with the underlying order of reality. This possibility exists even if direct contact is not possible because it is too distant or different from our mode of being. This is the singular importance of mediation. It creates a connection between things that could not otherwise be connected. Three examples that Weil develops show this. The number one has no relation to

1 This is the subject of "Precondition of non-servile work".

nine, but when one is placed in relation to three, becoming the fraction one third, and three is placed in relation to nine, becoming the fraction three ninths, the two fractions, one third and three ninths, are related by being equal. One is still not in direct relation to nine but has a relation mediated by three, to which one and nine are each connected. Speaking in Christian religious terms, a person cannot comprehend God but can be in relation to Christ, and Christ is in relation to God, and thus as with the fractions, while the person does not have a direct relation to God, he has a relation that is indirect, mediated by Christ. Likewise, one cannot comprehend the timeless, unchanging nature of reality itself, but one can come to comprehend the manifestation of its nature through the order of existence here below; and the order of existence here below is in relation to the nature of reality itself, so an indirect relation to the nature of reality itself is possible through the mediation of the order of necessity in our existence here below. It is this, at varying levels of experience, that the texts of Part 2 describe.

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PRECONDITION OF NON-SERVILE WORK

There is in manual work and in implementation work[1] generally, which is 418
work properly speaking, an irreducible element of servitude that even perfect social equity would not erase. This is due to the fact that it is governed by necessity, not by purposiveness.[2] One does it because of a need, not with a view to a good; "because one needs to make a living," as is said by those who spend their lives doing so. One puts in an effort at the end of which, in all respects, one will have nothing other than what one has. Without this 419
effort, one would lose what one has.

1 'Implementation work' reverse-translates the French translation of this technical term introduced by the American originator of management science, Frederick Winslow Taylor. Weil knew the terminology because she had previously lectured to workers' meetings about Taylorism, as it was known. One of Taylor's central tenets was to separate planning from implementing the plan. The principal effect is to remove all initiative from the worker who is simply executing someone else's plan.

2 Weil makes significant use of the French word 'finalité' in this article. It could be translated directly as 'finality' if readers understood it to have its technical, philosophical meaning in English. In French it is also a philosophical term related to a *telos* or end; however its common meaning as purpose or aim is not too distant, unlike its common meaning in English. To mark its specific meaning, *finalité* is translated as purposiveness, while the French root within *finalité*, 'fin', is translated as purpose rather than end.

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But in human nature effort has no source of energy other than desire. And it is not in man to desire what he has. Desire is a directedness, a commencing of movement towards something. The movement is towards a point where one is not. If the movement just begun loops back on itself to its starting point, one spins around like a squirrel in a cage, like a prisoner in a cell. Spinning around constantly fast produces nausea.

Nausea, lassitude or disgust is the great temptation for those who work, especially if they are in inhuman conditions and even if not. Sometimes this temptation grips the best most.

Existing is not an end for man, it is merely the underpinning of all goods, whether true or false. Goods are added to existence. When they disappear, when existence is no longer adorned with any good, when it is naked, it no longer has any relationship to good. It is even an evil. And it is at this very moment when existence takes the place of all the absent goods, that it becomes in itself the sole purpose, the sole object of desire. The desire of the soul finds itself attached to an evil naked and unveiled. The soul is then in horror.

This horror is that of the moment when imminent violence is going to inflict death. This moment of horror lasted in the past over a lifetime for the one who, disarmed under the sword of the victor, was spared. In exchange for the life that was left to him, he had to use all his energy toiling as a slave, all day long, every day, unable to hope for anything other than not being killed or flogged. He could no longer pursue any good except existing. The ancients used to say that the day that made him a slave took half his soul from him.

But any condition where one finds oneself necessarily in the same situation on the last day of a period of one month, one year, or twenty years of effort as on the first day bears a resemblance to slavery. The resemblance lies in the impossibility of desiring anything other than what one possesses, of directing one's effort towards the acquisition of a good. Effort is then exerted merely to survive.

The unit of time then becomes the day. Within this space one goes round in circles. Within it one oscillates between work and rest like a ball bounced back and forth from one wall to the other. One works only because one
420 needs to eat. But one eats to be able to continue working. And then once again one works in order to eat.

Everything is an intermediate in this existence, everything is a means, and purpose finds no purchase anywhere in it. The manufactured thing is a

means; it will be sold. Who can set his good on it? The material, the tool, the worker's body, and his soul itself are means for manufacturing.[3] Necessity is everywhere, good nowhere.

It is not necessary to search for the causes of the demoralisation of the people. The cause is right there; it is permanent; it is integral to the condition of work. It is necessary to search for the causes which, in earlier times, prevented the demoralisation from arising.

A great mental inertia or a great physical strength that renders the effort almost imperceptible makes it possible to endure this emptiness. Otherwise compensations are needed. Ambition for a different social condition for oneself or for one's children is one such. Easy and violent pleasures are another of the same kind; it is a dream in place of ambition. Sunday is the day when one wants to forget that a necessity to work exists. For that one must spend. One must be dressed as if one did not work. One needs the gratifications of vanity and illusions of power that licence very easily procures. Debauchery has exactly the function of a narcotic and the use of narcotics is always a temptation for those who suffer. Finally, revolution is yet another compensation of the same kind; it is ambition transported into the collective, the mad ambition of an ascent of all workers out of the condition of being workers.

The revolutionary sentiment is for most initially a revolt against injustice, but it quickly becomes for many, as it became historically, a working-class imperialism completely analogous to national imperialism. Its objective is completely unlimited rule by a certain collective over the whole of humanity and over all aspects of human life. The absurdity is that, in this dream, rule would be in the hands of those who are just implementing and who as a result cannot rule.

As a revolt against social injustice, the revolutionary idea is good and healthy. As a revolt against the suffering inherent in the very condition of workers, it is a lie. For no revolution will eliminate this suffering. But this lie is what has the greatest hold, since this inherent suffering is felt more

3 It is notable that in this essay Weil does not only use the word 'ouvrier' (worker, working-class) but also the—uncommon for her—word 'travailleur' which has direct connection to the French verb, 'travailler' (to work) and 'travail' (work). This is the only text in the volume to use 'travailleur'. To capture this undoubtedly intentional word choice, the translation translates 'travailleur' by 'worker' and 'ouvrier' by 'working class' (or 'working-class' where English grammar requires a hyphen).

421 acutely, more deeply, more painfully than the injustice itself. Moreover one usually confuses them. The name opium of the people that Marx applied to religion might have suited it when religion was unfaithful to itself, but it essentially suits revolution. The hope of revolution is always a narcotic.

Revolution satisfies at the same time that need for adventure, as being the thing most opposed to necessity, which is yet another reaction against the same suffering. The taste for detective novels and cop movies or the tendency towards criminality that appears among adolescents also corresponds to this need.

The middle-class has been very naive in believing that the right recipe lay in passing on to the people the purpose that governs their own life, namely the acquisition of money. They have gone as far as possible with this through piecework and the expansion of interaction between town and country. But all they have done is to bring dissatisfaction to a level of dangerous exasperation. The cause of this is simple. Money as the goal of desires and efforts cannot have conditions internal to it such that it is impossible to become rich. A minor industrialist or a small retailer can become rich and become a major industrialist or a large retailer. A teacher, a writer, and a minister are what they are whether rich or poor. But someone working class who becomes very rich ceases to be working class and it is all but the same for a peasant. Someone working class cannot be gripped by the desire for money without desiring to leave, alone or with all his comrades, the condition of being working class.

The universe where the workers live denies purposiveness. It is impossible for a purpose to enter it, except for very brief periods tied to exceptional situations. The rapid industrial development in new countries, such as took place in America and Russia, produces change upon change at a pace so brisk that it offers everyone, almost day by day, new things to anticipate, desire and hope for; this frenzy of construction has been Russian communism's great instrument of seduction, by coincidence since it was due to the economic state of the country and not the revolution or Marxist doctrine. When one develops metaphysics on the basis of these exceptional, transient and brief situations, as the Americans and Russians have done, these metaphysics are lies.

The family provides a purpose in the form of children to raise. But unless one is hoping for a different condition for them—and in the nature of things
422 such social advancement is inherently exceptional—the sight of children

condemned to the same existence does not stop one from experiencing the emptiness and weight of this existence with pain.

This heavy emptiness causes a lot of suffering. It is felt even by many of those who have no learning and low intelligence. Those who, owing to their condition, do not know what this is cannot fairly judge the actions of those who endure it their whole life. It does not cause death, but it is perhaps as painful as hunger. Perhaps more. Perhaps it would be literally true to say that bread is less necessary than the remedy for this pain.

There is no choice of remedies. There is one only. Only one thing makes the monotony bearable, it is a light of eternity; it is beauty.

There is only one instance where human nature can bear the desire of the soul being directed not towards that which could be or will be, but towards that which exists. This circumstance is beauty. Everything that is beautiful is an object of desire, but one does not desire that it be other than it is, one does not desire to change anything about it, one desires the very thing that is. One looks with desire at the starry sky of a clear night, and what one desires is just the sight that one possesses.

Since the people are constrained to direct all their desire onto what they possess already, beauty is made for them and they are made for beauty. Poetry is a luxury for the other social conditions. The people need poetry as they need bread. Not poetry confined to words; that, by itself, can be of no use to them. They need that the daily substance of their life be itself poetry.

Such poetry can only have one source. This source is God. This poetry can only be religion. By no ploy, no technique, no reform, and no upheaval can purposiveness gain entry into the universe in which the workers are placed by their very condition. Yet this universe can be suspended in its entirety from the one purpose which could be true. It can be fastened to God. The condition of workers is one in which the hunger for purposiveness which constitutes the very being of every man cannot be satisfied except by God.

Therein is their privilege. They alone possess it. In all the other conditions, without exception, specific purposes suggest themselves as activities. There is no specific purpose, not even the salvation of a soul or of many souls, that cannot act as a screen and hide God. Detachment is needed to pierce the screen. For the workers there is no screen. Nothing separates them from 423
God. They have only to raise their heads.

The hard thing for them is to raise their heads. They do not, as do all other men, have too much of something that they must shed with effort.

They have too little of something. They lack intermediaries. When they have been advised to think of God and offer him their troubles and sufferings, nothing yet has been done for them.

People go to the churches expressly to pray; and yet one knows that they will be unable to do so unless their attention is given intermediaries to sustain their orientation towards God. The very architecture of the church, the images with which it is filled, the words of the liturgy and prayers, and the ritual gestures of the priest are these intermediaries. By fixing on them, attention comes to be oriented towards God. How much more necessary are such intermediaries to for that place of work where one only goes to earn one's living! There, everything ties thought down to the earth.

However one cannot introduce religious images into the workplace and propose to the workers that they look at them. Neither can one suggest to them reciting prayers while working. The only sensible objects onto which they can direct their attention are the materials, the tools and the movements in their work. Unless these objects are themselves transformed into mirrors of light, it is impossible for attention during work to be directed towards the source of all light. There is no necessity more pressing than this transformation.

It is only possible if matter, as it is presented to the work of men, contains a reflective property. For it is not a question of fabricating fictions or arbitrary symbols. Fiction, imagination and reveries are nowhere more out of place than in what concerns the truth. But fortunately for us, there is a reflective property in matter. Matter is a mirror clouded by our breath. One has only to clean the mirror and read the symbols written within matter for all eternity.

The Gospels contain some of them. Inside a room, if one is to reflect on the necessity of the death of the self[4] for a birth new and true, one needs to read or repeat to oneself the words about the seed that death alone renders fruitful. But he who is engaged in sowing can, if he wants, direct his attention to this truth without the aid of any words through the medium of his own movements and the sight of the seed being buried. If he does
424 not reason over it, if he simply looks at it, the attention that he brings to the accomplishment of his task is not hindered, but brought to the highest

4 Here 'mort morale' is translated as death of the self, since moral or psychical death would be misleading.

degree of intensity. It is not in vain that religious attention is called the plenitude of attention. Plenitude of attention is nothing other than prayer.

It is the same for the separation of the soul from Christ, separation that shrivels the soul just as the branch shrivels when cut from the vine. The pruning of the vine lasts days and days on the great estates. But there is also a truth in it that one can look at for days and days without exhausting it.

It would be easy to find, inscribed for all eternity in the nature of things, many other symbols capable of transfiguring not only work in general, but each task in its singularity. Christ is the bronze serpent which just to look upon is enough to escape death. But it is necessary to be able to look upon it in a completely uninterrupted manner. For that, the things upon which life's needs and obligations constrain the sight to focus must reflect that which they prevent us from looking upon directly. It would be quite astonishing that a church constructed by the hand of man should be full of symbols and the universe not be infinitely full of them. It is infinitely full of them. They must be read.

The image of the Cross compared to a scales in the Good Friday hymn could be an inexhaustible inspiration for those who carry loads, operate levers, or are tired at night by the weightiness of things. On a scales, a considerable weight close to the fulcrum can be raised by a very slight weight placed at a very great distance. The body of Christ was very slight in weight, but through the distance between the earth and heaven acted as a counterweight to the universe. In an infinitely different way, but analogous enough to serve as an image, whoever works, lifts loads or uses levers must also make his slight body a counterweight to the universe. It is much too heavy, and often the universe makes the body and soul sag from weariness. But he who is fastened to heaven will easily act as a counterweight. He who has once glimpsed this thought cannot be drawn away from it by fatigue, boredom or disgust. He cannot but be led back to it.

In the fields, the sun and the plant sap are unceasingly speaking of what is greatest in the world. We do not live by anything other than the energy of the sun; we eat it, and it is what keeps us standing, what makes our muscles move and what works in us bodily in all of our actions. It is perhaps, in 425
various forms, the only thing in the universe that constitutes a force counteracting gravity; it is what rises in the trees, what through our arms raises loads and what moves our motors. It comes from an inaccessible source, one towards which we cannot move even one step closer. It continually descends

upon us. But although we are perpetually bathed in it we cannot capture it. Only the plant constituent chlorophyll can capture it for us and turn it into our food. All that is needed is that the earth be properly prepared by our efforts; then, through the chlorophyll, the energy of the sun becomes something solid and enters us as bread, as wine, as oil, and as fruit. The whole of the work of a farmer consists in looking after and nurturing this inherent power of plants which is a perfect image of Christ.

The laws of mechanics, which derive from geometry and which control our machines, contain supernatural truths. The oscillation of alternating movement is the image of the earthly condition. All that pertains to creatures is limited, except the desire within us which is the mark of our origin; and our greed, which makes us seek the unlimited here below, is in this way for us the sole source of error and crime. The goods that things contain are finite, as are the evils, and in general a cause produces a determinate effect only up to a certain point, beyond which, if it continues to act, the effect reverses itself. It is God who imposes a limit on all things and by whom the sea is bound. In God there is only an eternal and unchanging act that turns back on itself and has no object other than itself. In creatures there are only movements directed towards the outside, but due to the limit are constrained to oscillate; this oscillation is a degraded reflection of the self-directedness that is exclusively divine. This connection is imaged in our machines in the connection of circular movement and alternating movement. The circle is also the locus of mean proportionals; in order to find, in a perfectly accurate way, the mean proportional between the unit and a number that is not square, there is no method other than tracing a circle. The numbers for which no mediation exists that naturally relates them to the unit are images of our misery; and the circle coming from the outside, in a mode transcendent relative to the domain of numbers, to bring a mediation, is the image of the sole
426 remedy for this misery. These truths and many others are written into the simple sight of a pulley that delineates an oscillating movement; these can be read with a basic geometric understanding; the very rhythm of work, corresponding as it does to oscillation, renders them perceptible to the body; a human life is a rather short interval in which to contemplate them.

One could find plenty of other symbols, some of them more intimately tied to the very bodily movements of one who works. Sometimes it would be enough if the worker extended his attitude towards work to everything without exception so as to possess the plenitude of virtue. Symbols can also be

found for those who have implementation jobs other than physical work. One can find them for bookkeepers in the elementary operations of arithmetic, for cashiers in the institution of money, and so on. The reservoir is inexhaustible.

Starting there, one could do a lot. Imparting these grand images, connected to basic scientific ideas and general culture, to adolescents within their study groups. Proposing them as themes for their festivities, for their theatrical endeavours. Establishing new festivities around them, for example on the eve before the big day when a 14-year old budding farmer ploughs alone for the first time. Ensuring, by means of them, that ordinary men and the women live perpetually bathed in an atmosphere of supernatural poetry; as in the Middle Ages; even more than in the Middle Ages; for why set limits to our ambition for the good?

One would thus spare them the feeling of intellectual inferiority so frequent and sometimes so painful, as well as the arrogant confidence that at times replaces it after a brief contact with the things of the mind. Intellectuals, for their part, could thus avoid both the unjust disdain and the sort of deference no less unjust that demagoguery made fashionable, several years ago, in certain circles. Both sides would come together, without any inequality, at the highest point, the point of the plenitude of attention, which is the plenitude of prayer. At least those who were able to do so. The others would at least know that this point exists and would picture the diversity of ascending paths, which, although causing a separation at lower levels, as does the breadth of the mountain, does not prevent equality.

Schoolwork has no other serious goal than the development of the attention. Attention is the only faculty of the soul that gives access to God. Schooling exercises a lower discursive attention, the one that reasons; but, guided 427
by a suitable method, it can prepare for the appearance of another attention in the soul, that which is the highest, the intuitive attention. Intuitive attention in its purity is the unique source of perfectly beautiful art, of truly luminous and original scientific discoveries, of philosophy that truly leads towards wisdom, and of truly beneficent love of one's neighbour; and it is such attention that, turned directly towards God, constitutes true prayer.

Just as a set of symbols would enable digging and reaping while thinking of God, so too a method transforming schoolwork into preparation for this higher kind of attention would alone enable an adolescent to think about God while he is applying himself to a geometry problem or a Latin

translation. Without this, intellectual work underneath a mask of freedom is itself also servile work.

Those who have leisure need, in order to arrive at intuitive attention, to exercise the faculties of discursive intelligence to their limits; otherwise they pose an obstacle. Especially for those whose social function requires them to make use of these faculties, there is probably no other route. But the obstacle is small and the exercise of these faculties can be reduced to very little for those in whom the fatigue from long, daily work almost completely paralyses these faculties. For them the very work that produces this paralysis, provided it is transformed into poetry, is the route that leads to intuitive attention.

In our society the difference in education, more than the difference in wealth, produces the illusion of social inequality. Marx, who is almost always very good when he is simply describing evil, has rightfully branded as a degradation the separation of manual work and intellectual work. But he did not know that in every domain opposites have their unity on a plane that in its relation to both is transcendent. The point of unity for intellectual work and manual work is contemplation, which is not a form of work. In no society does one who operates a machine exercise the same kind of attention as one who solves a problem. But one and the other can encourage, to the same extent if they desire to do so and have a method, by exercising the kind of attention that constitutes each one's lot in society, the appearance and development of another attention beyond all social obligation, one which constitutes a direct link with God.

428 If school pupils, young peasants, and working-class youth had pictured in a completely precise way, as precise as the cogs in a clearly understood mechanism, the different social functions as being equally effective preparations for the appearance in the soul of one and the same transcendent faculty, which alone has value, then equality would become something concrete. It would then be at once a principle of justice and of order.

The completely precise picture of the supernatural goal of each social function alone provides a rule for undertaking reforms. It alone enables defining injustice. Otherwise it is inevitable that one makes a mistake, either by regarding as injustices sufferings inscribed in the nature of things, or by attributing to the human condition sufferings that are effects of our crimes and fall on those who do not deserve them.

A certain subordination and a certain invariability are sufferings inscribed in the very essence of work and are inseparable from the supernatural

vocation that corresponds to it. They are not degrading. Anything that adds to them is unjust and degrading. Anything that hinders poetry from forming crystalline around these sufferings is a crime. For it is not enough to recover the lost source of such a poetry, it is also necessary that the very conditions of the work permit its existence. If they are poor, they kill it.

Everything that is indissolubly linked to the desire for or the fear of a change, to the orientation of thought towards the future, would have to be excluded from an essentially unvarying existence that has to be accepted as such. First and foremost physical suffering, apart from that which is made manifestly inevitable by the necessities of the work. For it is impossible to suffer without aspiring to its relief. Privations would be better placed in any social condition other than this one. Food, lodging, rest and leisure must be such that a working day, taken on its own, is normally free of physical suffering. On the other hand the superfluous also does not belong in this life; for the desire for the superfluous is in itself unlimited and implies desiring a change of condition. All advertising, all propaganda, so varied in its forms, which seeks to arouse the desire for the superfluous in the fields and among the working class should be viewed as a crime. An individual can always leave the condition of being working class or a peasant, either by radical lack of vocational aptitude, or by possessing different aptitudes; but for those 429
who are in it, there should be no change possible other than from straitened circumstances to more comfortable ones; there should be no opportunity for them to fear falling into less or hope for attaining more. Security should be greater in this social condition than in any other. The vicissitudes of supply and demand must therefore not rule over it.

The gratuitousness of the human will forces the soul, unless it is able to defend itself against it, to fear and to hope. It must therefore be excluded from work as far as is possible. Authority should only be present there when it is completely impossible that it be absent. The small farm property is thus better than the large. Consequently, anywhere where the small is possible, the large is an evil. Similarly, manufacturing machined parts in a small craftsman workshop is better than manufacturing which is done under the orders of a foreman. Job praises death because the slave no longer hears the voice of his master. Every time the voice that commands makes itself heard when a practicable arrangement could replace it with silence, it is an evil.

But the worst assault, one which would perhaps deserve being likened to crime against the Spirit, which is unpardonable, were it not probably

committed by the oblivious, is the assault against the attention of workers. It kills within the soul the faculty in it that forms the very root of any supernatural vocation. The low grade of attention demanded by Taylorised work is not compatible with any other kind of attention, because it empties the soul of anything that is not concerned with speed. This kind of work cannot be transfigured, it must be eliminated.

All the problems of technology and the economy should be formulated in relation to a conception of the best possible conditions for work. Such a conception is the principal rule; the whole society should be structured above all in such a way that work does not pull down those who carry it out.

It is not enough to want to spare them suffering, one should want their joy. Not pleasures that come at a price, but joys that come at no cost which do not impair the spirit of poverty. The supernatural poetry that should bathe their whole life should also be concentrated into its pure form, every so often, in dazzling festivities. Festivities are as indispensable for this existence as milestones are to the cheer of the walker. Working travels, at no cost, similar to
430 the journeyman's Tour of France in earlier times, during their youth should satisfy their hunger to see and to learn. Everything should be arranged so that they lack nothing essential. The best among them should be able to come to possess in their own life the fulfilment that artists seek indirectly through the intermediary of their art. If man's vocation is to attain pure joy through suffering, they are better placed than all others to accomplish it in the most real way.

Émile NOVIS

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

Weil wrote this article for publication in April 1942 near the end of her sojourn in Marseilles, when the influence of her friendship with the Dominican Joseph-Marie Perrin was near its peak. On one level, her target is the effect that the "management science" conceived by F. W. Taylor has on workers when work is transformed to minimise individual initiative. On a deeper level, Weil seeks to describe how work can, by affording contact with reality, play the central role in spiritual growth.

16

REFLECTIONS ON THE GOOD USE OF SCHOOL STUDIES WITH A VIEW TO THE LOVE OF GOD

The key to a Christian conception of studies is that prayer is made up of 255
attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God. The quality of attention adds a lot to the quality of prayer. Warmth of heart cannot make up for it.

Only the highest part of attention enters into contact with God, whenever prayer is intense and pure enough for such a contact to be established; but all of the attention is turned towards God.

School[1] exercises develop, needless to say, a less elevated part of the attention. Nonetheless they are fully effective in increasing the power of attention that will be available at the moment of prayer, on condition that they are 256
carried out for this end and for this end only.

Although nowadays this seems not to be known, the development of the faculty of attention is the true goal and almost sole interest of studies. Most school exercises also have an intrinsic interest; but this interest is secondary.

1 'School' here translates 'scolaire' which has academic, scholarly connotations as well as relating to schools. Weil therefore means academic studies, especially as undertaken in school.

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Every exercise that truly calls upon the power of attention is interesting in the same way and nearly equally so.

High schoolers, students who love God should never say, "Myself, I like mathematics," "I like French," "I like Greek." They ought to learn to like all of these, because all of them expand this attention which, oriented towards God, is the very substance of prayer.

Not having either a natural talent or a taste for geometry does not preclude the investigation of a problem or the study of a proof from developing the attention. It is almost the opposite. It is almost a favourable circumstance.

Indeed, it matters little whether one succeeds in finding the solution or in grasping the proof, although it is important to have truly tried to succeed in doing so. Never, under any circumstances, is any true effort of attention wasted. It is always fully effective spiritually and in consequence, additionally, is also effective upon the lower plane of the intelligence, since all spiritual light illuminates the intelligence.

If one is trying to find the solution to a geometry problem with genuine attention and at the end of an hour is no further along than when one began, one has nevertheless during each minute of this hour moved forward within another more mysterious dimension. Without feeling it, without knowing it, this apparently unproductive and fruitless effort has brought more light into the soul. The fruit will be found someday, later on, in prayer. It will probably also be found moreover within some domain or another of the intelligence, perhaps completely foreign to mathematics. Perhaps one day he who has made this ineffective effort will, on account of this effort, be able to grasp the beauty of a verse of Racine more directly. But that the fruit of this effort shall be found in prayer, that is certain, of that there is no doubt.

Certainties of this kind are experiential. But if one does not believe in them before having experienced them, if one does not at least behave as though one believed in them, then one will never have the experience that gives access to such certainties. There is a kind of contradiction here. This is
257 the case, beyond a certain level, for any knowledge useful to spiritual progress. If one does not accept the knowledge as the basis for one's conduct before having verified it, if one does not remain attached to it by faith alone for a long time, a faith at first shadowy and without light, one will never transform it into certainty. Faith is the indispensable condition.(1)[2]

2 Weil added this numeral in parentheses to indicate a supplementary note, which is now lost or was perhaps never written. She crossed out a second note symbol below.

The best support for faith is the guarantee that if one asks one's Father for bread, he does not give stones. Even outside of any explicit religious belief, any time a human being makes an effort of attention with the sole desire of becoming better able to grasp the truth, he gains this greater ability, even if his effort does not produce any visible fruit. An Eskimo tale explains the origin of light this way, "The crow, who in eternal night could find no food, desired light, and the earth was illuminated." If there is truly desire, if the object of the desire is truly light, then the desire for light produces the light. There is truly desire when there is an effort of attention. It is truly the light that is desired if every other motive is absent. Even were the efforts of attention to remain seemingly unproductive for years, one day a light exactly proportional to these efforts will flood the soul. Each effort adds a little gold to a treasure that nothing in the world can steal. The useless efforts to learn Latin made by the Curé d'Ars during long and painful years bore all their fruit in the marvellous discernment by which he perceived the very soul of penitents behind their words and even behind their silence.

It is therefore necessary to study without any desire to get good grades, pass exams, or obtain some academic outcome, without any regard for preferences or natural aptitudes, by applying oneself equally to all exercises with the thought that they all serve to develop that attention which is the substance of prayer. | (2) | At the moment when one applies oneself to an exercise, it is necessary to want to complete it correctly; because this wanting is indispensable for there to truly be an effort. But, underlying this immediate goal, the deeper intention should be directed solely towards increasing the power of attention with a view to prayer, just as when one writes one traces the shapes of the letters on the paper not for the sake of that shape, but for the sake of the idea to be expressed.

To make this the sole intention in one's studies to the exclusion of any 258
other is the first condition for their best spiritual use. The second condition is to make oneself scrupulously face, to contemplate with attention, for a long time, every failed school exercise, in all the ugliness of its mediocrity, without looking for any excuse, without disregarding any mistake or any of the teacher's corrections, and so try to track the origin of each mistake. The temptation to do the opposite is strong, to skate over the corrected exercise, if it is shoddy, with a sidelong glance, and then immediately hide it away. Almost everyone does this almost always. The temptation must be resisted. Incidentally and in addition, nothing is more necessary for success in studying, since one works without making much progress, however much effort

one makes, if one shies away from paying attention to the mistakes made and the teachers' corrections.

Above all, the virtue of humility, a treasure infinitely more precious than any academic progress, can be acquired in this way. In this regard the contemplation of one's own stupidity is perhaps more useful than even the contemplation of sin. The awareness of sin gives one a sense of being wicked and sometimes a certain pride profits from it. When one is forcibly made to fix the gaze of one's eyes and one's soul on a school exercise stupidly failed, one feels with irresistible obviousness that one is something mediocre. There is no knowledge more desirable. If one succeeds in knowing this truth with one's whole soul, then one is firmly established on the right track.

If these two conditions are met in full, then school studies are probably as good a path to saintliness as any other.

To meet the second condition it is enough to want to do so. It is not the same for the first. Truly to pay attention, one must know how to go about it.

Most often one confuses a kind of muscular effort for attention. If one says to the pupils, "Now you have to pay attention," one sees them knitting their brows, holding their breath, and contracting their muscles. If after two minutes one asks them what they were paying attention to, they cannot answer. They did not pay attention to anything. They did not pay attention. They contracted their muscles.

One often expends this kind of muscular effort in one's studies. Since it makes one tired, one has the impression that one has been working. This is
259 an illusion. Tiredness has nothing to do with work. Work is effort that is useful, whether tiring or not. This kind of muscular effort in studying is completely unproductive, even when performed with good intention. This good intention is one of those that pave the road to hell. Studies undertaken this way can sometimes be good academically, from the perspective of grades and exams, but this is despite the effort and thanks to natural gifts; and such studies are always useless.

Willpower, that which makes one grit one's teeth if need be and endure suffering, is the principal weapon of the apprentice engaged in manual labour. But contrary to what is usually thought, it has almost no place in study. The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as essential in studies as breathing is for runners. Where it is absent, there are no students, only poor caricatures of apprentices who at the end of their apprenticeship will not even have a trade.

It is this role of desire in study that allows it to become a preparation for the spiritual life. For desire, directed towards God, is the only force capable of making the soul ascend. Or rather it is only God who comes to take hold of the soul and lifts it up, but only desire makes God come down. He does not come except to those who ask Him to come; and with those who ask often, for long enough, and ardently, He cannot help himself from coming down to them.

Attention is an effort, the greatest of efforts perhaps, but it is a negative effort. In itself it does not involve tiredness. When tiredness makes itself felt, attention is almost no longer possible, unless one is already well-practiced; it is then better to give in, find some relaxation, then a bit later start again, disengaging and re-engaging just as one breathes in and out.

Twenty minutes of intense and untiring attention is infinitely better than three hours of that application of the furrowed brow which makes one say, with a sense of accomplishment, "I really worked."

But, despite appearances, it is also much more difficult. There is something in our soul that recoils from true attention far more violently than flesh recoils from fatigue. This something is much closer to evil than is the flesh. This is why every time that one really exercises attention, one destroys some evil in oneself. If one exercises attention with this intention, a quarter 260
of an hour of attention is far better than good works.

Attention consists in suspending one's thinking, in leaving it available, empty and penetrable to the object, in holding within oneself, in proximity to thinking, but at a lower level and not in contact with it, the various kinds of acquired knowledge that one is forced to employ. Thinking should be, to all the particular and already-formed thoughts, like a man on a mountain who, looking ahead, simultaneously discerns below him, though without looking at them, many forests and plains. And above all thinking should be empty, waiting, seeking nothing, yet being ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it.

All the misinterpretations in translations, all the absurdities in solutions to geometry problems, all the clumsy turns of phrase and all of the defects in stringing together ideas in one's French homework, all this comes from thinking having rushed hurriedly over something and, being thus prematurely filled up, no longer available for the truth. The cause is always that one wanted to be active; one wanted to look for it. This can be confirmed every time, with every fault, if one traces it back to the root. There is no better exercise than this confirmation. For this truth is one of those which can only

be believed by proving it hundreds and thousands of times. This is how it is with all essential truths.

The most precious goods are not to be looked for, but waited for. For man cannot find them by his own efforts, and if he sets out looking for them, he will find false goods in their place whose falsehood he will not be able to discern.

The solution to a geometry problem is not of itself a precious good, but the same law also applies to it, because it is an image of a precious good. Being a little fragment of particular truth, it is a pure image of the unique Truth, eternal and living, that Truth who said one day in a human voice, "I am the truth."

Thought of thus, every school exercise is like a sacrament.

For every school exercise there is a specific way of waiting for truth with desire and without allowing oneself to look for it. A way of paying attention to what is given in a geometry problem without looking for the solution, to the words of a Latin or Greek text without looking for its meaning, of waiting, when one writes, for the right word to appear of itself at the tip of the pen by simply pushing aside the inadequate words.

261 The first duty toward schoolchildren and students is to make this method known to them, not just in general, but in the specific form pertaining to each exercise. It is the duty not only of their teachers, but also their spiritual guides. And the latter should furthermore throw into full light, into bright light, the analogy between the posture of the intelligence in each of these exercises and the situation of the soul which, its lamp filled with oil, awaits her Bridegroom with confidence and desire.[3] Let every loving adolescent, while doing a Latin translation, wish through that translation to come a little closer to the point when he will truly be that slave who, while his master is at a feast, watches and listens close by the door to open it as soon as there is a knock. The master then seats the slave at the table and serves him a meal himself.

It is only this attending, this attention, that can compel the master to such surpassing tenderness. When the slave has worn himself out in the fields, the master says to him on his return, "Prepare my meal and serve me."[4] And he calls him a useless |*servant*| slave who does only what he is commanded.

3 Allusion to Mt 25:1–13.

4 Lk 17:8.

Admittedly, in the domain of action one must do all that is commanded, no matter the cost in effort, fatigue and suffering, for he who disobeys does not love. But after all that one is still just a useless slave. This is a condition of love, but it is not enough. What compels the master to make himself the slave of his slave, to love him, is not any of this; still less is it a search that the slave might have the temerity to undertake on his own initiative; it is solely the vigilance, the attending and the attention.

Blessed then are those who pass their adolescence and their youth only in forming this power of attention. No doubt they are no closer to the good than their brothers who work in the fields and factories. They are close in another way. Fieldworkers, factory workers possess that proximity to God, of incomparable savour, which lies in the depth of poverty, in the absence of social consideration, and in long and lingering suffering. But if one considers the occupations in themselves, then studies are nearer to God, on account of that attention which is their soul. He who goes through years of study without developing this attention in himself has lost a great treasure.

It is not only the love of God that has attention as its substance. The love of one's neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of the 262
same substance. The afflicted need nothing else in this world other than men capable of paying attention to them. The capacity to pay attention to someone afflicted is very rare, very difficult; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle. Almost all who believe themselves to have this capacity do not. Warmth, good heartedness, and pity are not enough.

In the first legend of the Grail, it is said that the Grail, a miraculous stone that satisfies all hunger by virtue of the consecrated host, belongs to whoever shall first say to the guardian of the stone, a king three-quarters paralysed by the most painful wound, "What grieves you?"

The fullness of love of one's neighbour is simply being able to ask him, "What grieves you?" It is to know that the afflicted one exists, not as one in a collection, not as a specimen from a social category labelled "afflicted", but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day struck and marked by affliction with an unmistakable mark. For this it is sufficient, but essential, to know how to turn a certain look upon him.

This look is in the first place one that is attentive, in which the soul empties itself of all its own content so as to receive into itself the being at which it is looking, such as it is, in all its truth. Only he who is capable of this is capable of attention.

Thus it is true, though paradoxical, that a Latin translation or a problem of geometry, even if one does them incorrectly, provided only that they were given the appropriate kind of effort, can make one better able someday, much later, if the occasion for it presents itself, to bring to one who is afflicted, at the moment of his greatest distress, exactly the help that may save him.

For an adolescent capable of grasping this truth, and generous enough to desire this fruit in preference to all others, his studies would have the fullness of their spiritual efficacy even apart from any religious belief.

School studies are one of those fields that contain a pearl which to buy is worth selling all one's goods, keeping nothing for oneself.

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

This study of how the development of the attention through school studies aids spiritual growth was written in Marseilles in April 1942 for the attention of Weil's friend, the Dominican Father Perrin, who had recently become more involved in student education. Weil, of course, had practical experience of teaching in schools. The concept of attention was of central importance in Weil's mature thinking, and this idea is nowhere developed at more length than here.

17

SKETCH OF THE "COMMENTARY ON PYTHAGOREAN TEXTS"[1]

When the Pythagoreans talk of number, one must know that they always 698
have in mind geometric relations as well as arithmetic ones, as modern mathematicians do when they talk of generalised number. What the Pythagoreans called number is the relation of quantity, and is more generally every relation. Ἀριθμός and Λόγος are synonyms in their language.

Logos does mean word, and also reason, or wisdom, but above all relation, essentially the relation of mediation. It is exactly the sense the word has in John. "In the beginning was the Mediator, and the Mediator was with God, and the Mediator was God."[2]

Philo, by all accounts (I have not read him), had the idea of a mediator, but different than God, inferior to God. That was not Plato's thought. For he said: within proportion the intermediary becomes first and the last; the

1 This is a dense and incomplete sketch of the long commentary on the Pythagorean doctrine found next in chapter 18. It is offered here as an aid to understanding the longer essay. The reader may also find helpful Weil's own summary of that essay—completed after she had finished the longer essay—which she wrote in her notebook, OC VI:3, 400–406 and that was published in Richard Rees, *First and Last Notebooks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 85–91.

2 Jn 1:1.

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first and last both become intermediaries. This makes no sense applied to the numerical proportion which he is ostensibly talking about, such as 1, 3, 9. If one posits: 1 is to 3 as 3 is to 9, then in no way do 1 and 9 become intermediaries. By contrast, these words are illuminating if one applies them to the Incarnation. Christ is God and he is man. Given that the three Persons are one single God, then through the Incarnation God became man–God. At the same time man by faith and love becomes such that he no longer lives in himself, rather it is Christ who lives in him. Plato also says that the most beautiful link is the one which has the greatest capacity to make itself and the linked terms into one. The link itself must therefore be oneness. In other words, it is God.

When Plato says that Love is midway between God and Man, this is not a matter of an equality of distance. It is a matter of a geometric mediation of the kind that appears in so many of John's sayings as constituting Christ's function. There is a Pythagorean inspiration in the Gospel of John.

In the geometric construction of proportion, to have a proportion where the intermediate term is identical to the first, it suffices to take a point as the first term. The second is the diameter minus the first point, both making the diameter.[3] The geometrical mean between the two is then at a point, the very point which is the first term.

This theological interpretation of geometry, which incidentally is simple and illuminating in itself, is supported not only by the passage from Proclus, cited above,[4] but also by another fragment from Philolaus that is

3 What Weil is describing is using a line as the first term and putting a point at one end of the line; the second term is the extension of the line from the endpoint of the first; when both lines are taken together, they form the diameter for a circle; when a perpendicular drawn from the diameter at the endpoint of the first term intersects the circle's boundary, that perpendicular's *length* is the geometric mean (mean proportional) of the two terms. Weil's further thought is somewhat opaque. The geometrical mean, being a perpendicular from the diameter, begins at the point which ends the first term and which also begins the second. They are the same point. Moreover, that same point is the starting point for the perpendicular whose length is the geometric mean, and is a third or intermediate term. All three terms have one point in common. Moreover, when the geometric mean is placed into separate ratios with each of the two terms, a proportional relation is created that makes the first term and the second term equal. What had been unequal—the two terms—is now in Weil's sense equal.

4 Weil added these pages to a packet of other papers discussing the similarities between Greek and Christian thought in which she included the Proclus passage mentioned here. The passage can be found in "Concerning the Pythagorean Doctrine" on manuscript page 248, where it is a reference to Proclus, *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's* Elements, 22.11.

extremely strange to our present mindset, and which shows that at some point since Greece a change of direction took place. This moment can probably be placed in the Renaissance (not at the beginning). The aim would be to reverse this change of direction.

> ἴδοις δέ κα οὐ μόνον ἐν τοῖς δαιμονίοις καὶ θείοις πράγμασι τὰν τῶ ἀριθμῶ 699
> φύσιν καὶ τὰν δύναμιν ἰσχύουσαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρωπικοῖς ἔργοις καὶ λόγοις πᾶσι παντᾶ καὶ κατὰ τὰς δημιουργίας τᾶς τεχνικὰς πάσας καὶ κατὰ τὰν μουσικάν. [DK44B11]
>
> One can see what strength the nature and the inherent power of number possesses, not only in the affairs of God, but also everywhere in the doings and reasonings of men, and in all the workings of the various skills and in music.

[There is no][5] harmony between things which are alike, of the same root, of the same level, but between those which are nothing like that (Philolaus). Therefore, if friendship is a harmony, it is not given to man to be united with his like by a true friendship. The only true bond of friendship is that which unites man to the being who is furthest from him, that is to say God. In the strict and complete sense of the word, man cannot have a friend other than God, and this friendship consists in the mediation of the Son of God between his Father and man. A friendship between human beings either passes through God or is a false and corrupt image of the friendship between man and God. By a marvellous paradox it is with God and not with his like that man can be truly united by a relation of equality. But it is a harmonic equality, an equality which lies in the person of the Mediator.

The formula "justice is a number to the second power" is clarified in the same way.[6] For the Pythagoreans, oneness, the One, is a name which is appropriate to the Father, at least the oneness which is the origin; for there is another oneness, a oneness which is put together, which is harmony, and that Philolaus calls Hestia, the hearth, the central fire. This can only be the Holy Spirit. Oneness represents God as being at once the origin of all

5 This text is not in fact present and is inferred. There seems to be a manuscript page missing here.

6 DK58B4. The two DK-number references on this page use the standard Diels-Kranz numbering system, see page 241n3 for details.

numbers, seemingly the smallest of all, and at the same time the term by virtue of which the largest number that one could conceive will always be surpassed.

A square number, 9, 16, 25, is a number naturally connected to oneness through a proportion. One has proportions 1–3–9, 1–4–16, 1–5–25, etc. Numbers can be divided into two classes, those which are thus connected to oneness and those which are not.

Justice is the condition of rational creatures wherein the Son of God is as his Father is in him.

The sight of human misery shows clearly that men are all like the numbers which are not square. They are outside of justice. But something foreign to arithmetical numbers exists which, coming between them, transforms into squares the numbers that are not so, creating the mediation between them and oneness. This, as the *Epinomis* says, is "the use of plane figures."[7] If one takes a straight line with 12 equal segments, if one draws a circle having the sum of these segments as diameter, and if from the point which begins the last segment of the diameter one draws a perpendicular to just where one reaches the circle, the length thus obtained is to one of the segments as the sum of the eleven others is to it. Thanks to this, the number eleven is found to be connected to oneness through what Plato names geometric equality and Philolaus harmonic equality. This is what the *Epinomis* calls "the likening of numbers which are not naturally alike through the use of plane figures."[8] In Greek similar means proportional.[9] This is how one speaks of similar triangles. With the result that Plato, when he says, "likening to God consists in becoming just" (*Theaetetus*),[10] is expressing the same thing as the Pythago-
700 rean formula, "justice is a number to the second power." When one considers geometry under this aspect, one is not surprised that the *Epinomis* calls it a marvel that comes from God and not men.

7 Plato, *Epinomis* 990d. The fragments of this passage in the *Epinomis* are given in context at greater length in "Concerning the Pythagorean Doctrine", manuscript page 252.

8 Plato, *Epinomis* 990d.

9 Here the word translated as 'similar' is the same as the word translated 'alike' in the previous sentence, viz. 'semblable'. As an adjective *semblable* can mean alike or similar, and as a noun it means one's fellow or one's like, which is latent in English in 'resemble' and 'semblance'. 'Similar' is used here to keep the technical meaning of 'similar' in geometry, especially in relation to similar triangles.

10 *Theaetetus* 176b.

It is not just any plane figure that brings about this likening, it is the circle, which, once it is made to rotate in place, is the perfect image of the eternal act of the Trinity. The circle connects the segment taken as oneness and that segment which gives the measure of the mean proportional. In this geometric construction, oneness, mean, and circle are three forms of God. ★[11]

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

After Weil left Marseilles in May 1942, she spent two and half weeks in Casablanca, before leaving for New York in early June. During that time she wrote at length of the latent Christian presence in classical Greek philosophy and literature. This she sent to Father Perrin for use in training Dominican brothers. She included this incomplete sketch of the main idea in her essay on the Pythagorean doctrine. It presents the dense kernel of that idea which she elaborated at length in the longer essay.

11 Using the symbol of a star here, Weil connected this topic to a figure in the margin of a cross inscribed in a circle. She added, "If one carries the perpendicular at the diameter through from one side to the other, one gets a cross."

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CONCERNING THE PYTHAGOREAN DOCTRINE

Pythagorean thought is for us the great mystery of Greek civilisation. One finds it everywhere. It permeates nearly all poetry, nearly all philosophy—above all Plato, whom Aristotle regarded as a pure Pythagorean—music, architecture, and sculpture; all science proceeds from it, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, mechanics, and biology; that science which is fundamentally the same as ours. Plato's political thought (in its authentic form, that is, as it is outlined in *The Statesman*) derives from it. It encompassed almost all secular life. There was then as much unity between the different parts of secular life, and between secular life as a whole and supernatural life, as today there is separation. 244

The roots of Pythagorean thought go very far back into the past. Plato, in outlining the conception which is at the core of the doctrine, recalls a very ancient revelation, which is perhaps even the original revelation (*Philebus*).[1] Herodotus says that the Pythagoreans borrowed at least a large part of their beliefs from Egypt. Another ancient historian, Diodorus of Sicily, I believe, notes analogies between Pythagorean thought and Druidic thought, the

1 Weil is likely referring to *Philebus* 16c and Prometheus' gift to man of divine fire.

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latter of which, according to Diogenes Laertius, was regarded by some as one of the sources of Greek philosophy; which, incidentally, obliges one to
245 view the Druidic religion as being Iberian in origin, just as the metaphysical and religious part of Greek civilisation come from the Pelasgians.

[Parenthetically, Iberians, Pelasgians—i.e. Aegeo-Cretan-Trojans and those like them—, Phoenicians, Sumerians, and Egyptians, seem in prehistory to have formed around the Mediterranean a homogenous civilisation permeated by a supernatural and pure spirituality. Most of these peoples are named in the Bible as among the descendants of Ham. The Hellenes arrived in Greece, according to the testimony of Greek writers, ignorant of all spirituality; one can perhaps draw from this a conclusion valid for the bulk of Indo-Europeans. The Bible shows that there was very little spirituality in Israel until the exile. Among the Indo-European peoples—whom one generally connects to Japheth—and those that the Bible regards as Semites, there were two kinds. Some learned from contact with the populations they conquered and assimilated spirituality from them. Such were the Celts, the Greeks, and the Babylonians. Others remained obstinately deaf. Such were the Romans, probably the Assyrians, and the Hebrews at least until the exile. If one re-reads the episode of the three sons of Noah in this light, what becomes clear is that Noah, who was a pure, just and perfect being, fell into a mystical intoxication while naked in the mystical sense, that Noah had a revelation, that Ham shared in it, and that the other two sons refused to share in it. The curse which struck the descendants of Ham would then be the one that attaches to things here below which are too pure. The Hebrews would have arranged the story in such a way as to justify the massacre of the Canaanites. But Ezekiel expressly compares Egypt to the tree of life from the earthly Paradise, and Phoenicia, at least at the beginning of his story, to the cherub who is beside the tree. If this is the right way to see it, then a perfectly pure current of spirituality would run through antiquity going from pre-historic Egypt to Christianity. This current passes through Pythagoreanism.—(Observe that there is indeed a revelation connected to Noah, for the Bible says that God made a covenant with humanity through his person, a covenant whose symbol is the rainbow. There can be no covenant between God and man without a revelation. Deucalion, the Greek Noah, is the son of Prometheus, to whom Aeschylus and Plato attribute a revelation.)]²

2 Weil omitted to close the square brackets with which the paragraph began.

Today one can only see something of the depth of Pythagorean thought by engaging in a kind of divination, and one can only engage in such a divination from the inside, that is to say if one has truly drawn spiritual life from the texts one studies. 246

The fundamental texts are two or three fragments from Philolaus, a passage from the *Gorgias*, two from the *Philebus* and one from the *Epinomis*. There are also some lines passed on by Aristotle or Diogenes Laertius. To all this one must add a line from Anaximander, though he is not a Pythagorean. And it is necessary to keep in mind, as far as possible, the totality of Greek civilisation.

Here are the texts.

Philolaus (Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*).[3]

ἀνάγκα τὰ ἐόντα εἶμεν πάντα ἢ περαίνοντα ἢ ἄπειρα ἢ περαίνοντά τε καὶ ἄπειρα, ἄπειρα δὲ μόνον οὔ κα εἴη. ἐπεὶ τοίνυν φαίνεται οὔτ᾽ ἐκ περαινόντων πάντων ἐόντα οὔτ᾽ ἐξ ἀπείρων πάντων, δῆλον τ᾽ ἄρα ὅτι ἐκ περαινόντων τε καὶ ἀπείρων ὃ τε κόσμος καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ συναρμόχθη. [DK44B2]

ἀρχὰν οὐδὲ τὸ γνωσούμενον ἐσσεῖται πάντων ἀπείρων ὄντων. [DK44B3]

πάντα γε μὴν τὰ γιγνωσχόμενα ἀριθμὸν ἔχοντι· οὐ γὰρ οἷόν τε οὐδὲν οὔτε νοηθῆμεν οὔτε γνωσθῆμεν ἄνευ τούτου. [DK44B4]

ἡ μὲν μονὰς ὡς ἂν ἀρχὴ οὖσα πάντων . . . [DK44B8]

τὸ πρῶτον ἁρμοσθέν, τὸ ἓν . . . [DK44B7]

ψεῦδος δὲ οὐδὲν δέχεται ἁ τῶ ἀριθμῶ φύσις οὐδὲ ἁρμονία· οὐ γάρ οἰκεῖον αὐτοῖς ἐστι. τᾶς τῶ ἀπείρω καὶ ἀνοήτω χαὶ ἀλόγω φύσιος τὸ ψεῦδος καὶ ὁ φθόνος ἐστί.

Ψεῦδος δὲ οὐδαμῶς ἐς ἀριθμὸν ἐπιπνεῖ· πολέμιον γάρ καὶ ἐχθρὸν τᾶι φύσει τὸ ψεῦδος, ἁ δ᾽ ἀλήθεια οἰκεῖον καὶ σύμφυτον τᾶι τῶ ἀριθμῶ γενεᾶι. [DK44B11]

γνωμικὰ γὰρ ἁ φύσις ἁ τῶ ἀριθμῶ καὶ ἡγεμονικὰ καὶ διδασκαλικὰ τῶ ἀπορουμένω παντὸς καὶ ἀγνοουμένω παντί. οὐ γὰρ ἦς δῆλον οὐδενὶ οὐδὲν τῶν πραγμάτων οὔτε αὐτῶν ποθ᾽ αὑτὰ οὔτε ἄλλω πρὸς ἄλλο, εἶ μὴ ἦς ἀριθμὸς καὶ ἁ τούτω οὐσία. νῦν δὲ οὗτος καττὰν ψυχὰν ἁρμόζων αἰσθήσει πάντα γνωστὰ καὶ ποτάγορα ἀλλάλοις κατὰ γνώμονος φύσιν ἀπεργάζεται 247
σωματῶν καὶ σχίζων τοὺς λόγους χωρὶς ἑκάστους τῶν πραγμάτων τῶν τε ἀπείρων χαὶ τῶν περαινόντων.[DK44B11]

3 References to the passages using the standard Diels–Kranz numbering system, given in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (*The Fragments of the Pre-Socratics*), are appended for reference and coordination between the Greek and other translations.

περὶ δὲ φύσιος καὶ ἁρμονίας ὧδε ἔχει· ἀ μὲν ἐστὼ τῶν πραγμάτων ἀίδιος ἔσσα καὶ αὐτὰ μὲν ἀ φύσις θείαν γα χαὶ οὐκ ἀνθρωπίνην ἐνδέχεται γνῶσιν πλέον γα ἢ ὅτι οὐχ οἷόν τ᾽ ἦν οὐθὲν τῶν ἐόντων καὶ γιγνωσκόμενον ὑφ᾽ ἁμῶν γα γένεσθαι μὴ ὑπαρχούσας τᾶς ἐστοῦς τῶν πραγμάτων, ἐξ ὧν συνέστα ὁ κόσμος, καὶ τῶν περαινόντων καὶ τῶν ἀπείρων. ἐπεὶ δὲ ταὶ ἀρχαὶ ὑπᾶρχον οὐχ ὁμοῖαι οὐδ᾽ ὁμόφυλοι ἔσσαι, ἤδη ἀδύνατον ἦς κα αὐταῖς κοσμηθῆναι, εἰ μὴ ἁρμονία ἐπεγένετο ὠιτινιῶν ἅδε τρόπωι ἐγένετο. τὰ μὲν ὦν ὁμοῖα καὶ ὁμόφυλα ἁρμονίας οὐδὲν ἐπεδέοντο, τὰ δὲ ἀνόμοια μηδὲ ὁμόφυλα μηδὲ ἰσοταγῆ ἀνάγκα τᾶι τοιαύται ἁρμονίαι συγκεκλεῖσθαι, οἵαι μέλλοντι ἐν κόσμωι κατέχεσθαι. [DK44B6]

ἔστι ἁρμονία πολυμιγέων ἕνωσις καὶ δίχα φρονεόντων συμφρόνησις. [DK44B10]

— Necessarily all realities are either limiting or unlimited or else limiting and unlimited. Only unlimited, that cannot be. Therefore, since it is manifest that realities do not proceed only from that which limits nor only from that which is unlimited, evidently the order of the world, and the things the world contains, have been made harmonious out of that which limits and that which is unlimited. [B2]

— At the outset there would not even be something susceptible of being known if everything were unlimited. [B3]

— All that is known has number in it. For without number nothing can be thought or known. [B4]

— Oneness[4] is the principle of all things. [B8]

— The first to be attuned, the one, at the centre of the sphere is named Hestia. [B7]

— The nature of number, and harmony absolutely do not admit the false, for it does not pertain to them. Falsehood and envy relate to the nature of what is unlimited, unthinkable and without proportion.

The false never projects its spirit into number, for it is essentially inimical and hostile to it. Truth pertains to the creation of number, it is of the same root. [B11]

4 'Oneness' translates 'unité' here. In French, 'unité' can mean unity, oneness or even, mathematically speaking, the unit. The translation mostly moves between 'unity' and 'oneness' depending on the sense.

— The nature of number is productive of knowledge, a guide and a teacher for anyone in perplexity or ignorance about anything at all. For there 248
would be nothing clear in things, neither in themselves, nor in their mutual relations, if there were not number and its essence.[5] But now, throughout the soul, attuning all things to sensibility, number makes them knowable and mutually agreeable, and gives them a body and forcefully separates out each relation in both the unlimited things and the limiting things.[B11][6]

— Here is what nature and harmony are about. What is the eternal essence of things and what is nature in itself can only be known by the divine and not by man, except note the following. No realities could even be known to us were there not the underpinning of the essence of the things of which the world is composed, some limiting, the others unlimited. Since the primordial elements which underpin everything are not alike nor of the same root, it would be impossible that out of them there might be an order of the world if harmony were not added to it in some way. For things that are alike and of the same root have no need of harmony; for those which are not alike, nor of the same root, nor of the same level, it is necessary that they be held together under lock and key by a harmony capable of keeping them within an order of the world. [B6]

— Harmony is unification out of a mixture. It is the common thought of that which thinks separately. [B10]

Cf. Proclus, commentary on Euclid.[7]

διὸ καὶ ὁ Πλάτων πολλὰ χαὶ θαυμαστὰ δόγματα περὶ θεῶν διὰ τῶν μαθηματικῶν εἰδῶν ἡμᾶς ἀναδιδάσκει καὶ ἡ τὼν Πυθαγορείων φιλοσοφία παραπετάσμασι τούτοις χρωμένη τὴν μυσταγωγίαν κατακρύπτεί τῶν θείων δογμάτων. τοιοῦτος γὰρ καὶ ὁ ῾Ιερὸς σύμπας λόγος καὶ ὁ Φιλόλαος

5 The French word *rapport* has several meanings including connection, link, and the mathematical idea of a ratio, viz. a relation between quantities. It thus most generally indicates a relation between entities, or a relationship. In this text *rapport* is most often translated by 'relation'.

6 Weil omitted to translate a portion of the Greek she had transcribed. However, she refers to the omitted element later on manuscript page 272. The sentence with the Greek restored (in italics) would read: But now, throughout the soul, attuning all things to sensibility, number makes them knowable and mutually agreeable, and gives them a body *in conformity with the nature of the gnomon* and forcefully separates out each relation in both the unlimited and the limiting things.

7 Proclus, *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's* Elements, 22.11.

ἐν ταῖς Βάκχαις καὶ ὅλος ὁ τρόπος τῆς Πυθαγόρου περὶ θεῶν ὑφηγήσεως. [DK44B19]

Plato teaches us many marvellous tenets concerning the divine by means of mathematical concepts; and Pythagorean wisdom also makes use of them as a cloak to hide the mystical path of the divine doctrine. This is the case for the entire "Hieros Logos", and for Philolaus in his *Bacchae*, and for the whole method of Pythagoras' teaching concerning the divine.

249 Plato. *Gorgias*, 507d[8]

. . . ἀκολασίαν φευκτέον ὡς ἔχει ποδῶν ἕκαστος . . . οὐκ ἐπιθυμίας ἐῶντ᾽ ἀκολάστους εἶναι καὶ ταύτας ἐπιχειροῦντα πληροῦν, ἀνήνυτον κακόν, λῃστοῦ βίον ζῶντα. Οὔτε γὰρ ἂν ἄλλῳ ἀνθρώπῳ προσφιλὴς ἂν εἴη ὁ τοιοῦτος οὔτε θεῷ· κοινωνεῖν γὰρ ἀδύνατος· ὅτῳ δὲ μὴ ἔνι κοινωνία, φιλία οὐκ ἂν εἴη. Φασὶ δ᾽ οἱ σοφοί, ὦ Καλλίκλεις, καὶ οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν καὶ θεοὺς καὶ ἀνθρώπους τὴν κοινωνίαν συνέχειν καὶ φιλίαν καὶ κοσμιότητα καὶ σωφροσύνην καὶ δικαιότητα, καὶ το ὅλον τοῦτο διὰ ταῦτα κόσμον καλοῦσιν, ὦ ἑταῖρε, οὐκ ἀκοσμίαν οὐδ᾽ ἀκολασίαν. Σὺ δέ μοι δοκεῖς οὐ προσέχειν τὸν νοῦν τούτοις, καὶ ταῦτα σοφὸς ὤν, ἀλλὰ λέληθέ σε, ὅτι ἡ ἰσότης ἡ γεωμετρικὴ καὶ ἐν θεοῖς καὶ ἐν ἀνθρώποις μέγα δύναται. Σὺ δὲ πλεονεξίαν οἴει δεῖν ἀσκεῖν· γεωμετρίας γὰρ ἀμελεῖς.

Everyone should flee intemperance as fast as his feet can carry him . . . and not permit intemperance in one's desires, and trying to fulfil them, an endless evil, the existence of a thief. For he who lives that way is unable to be in close friendship, neither with another man, nor with God; for he is not capable of associating; and he for whom there is no association, there is no friendship. And the sages say, Callicles, that what unites heaven and earth, gods and men, is association, friendship, order, restraint, and justice; that is why this universe has been called order (cosmos), and not disorder and licentiousness. But you, it seems to me, you do not pay attention to this, even though you are educated. You have not seen that geometric equality, both among gods and among men, has a great power. You believe that one should apply oneself to accumulating. That is because you do not pay attention to geometry.

Philebus, 16b-17a.

Οὐ μὴν ἔστι καλλίων ὁδὸς οὐδ᾽ ἂν γένοιτο, ἧς ἐγὼ ἐραστὴς μέν εἰμι ἀεί, πολλάκις δ᾽ ἐμὲ ἤδη διαφυγοῦσα ἔρημον καὶ ἄπορον κατέστησε . . .

8 Actually, *Gorgias* 507d–508a.

Θεῶν μὲν εἰς ἀνθρώπους δόσις, ὡς γε καταφαίνεται ἐμοὶ ποθὲν ἐκ θεῶν ἐρρίφη διά τινος Προμηθέως ἅμα φανοτάτῳ τινὶ πυρί· καὶ οἱ μὲν παλαιοί, κρείττονες ἡμῶν καὶ ἐγγυτέρω θεῶν οἰκοῦντες, ταύτην φήμην παρέδοσαν, ὡς ἐξ ἑνὸς μὲν καὶ ἐκ πολλῶν ὄντων τῶν ἀεὶ λεγομένων εἶναι, πέρας δὲ καὶ ἀπειρίαν. ἐν αὐτοῖς ξύμφυτον ἐχόντων· δεῖν οὖν ἡμᾶς τούτων οὕτω 250
διακεκοσμημένων ἀεὶ μίαν ἰδέαν περὶ παντὸς ἑκάστοτε θεμένους ζητεῖν· εὑρήσειν γὰρ ἐνοῦσαν· ἐὰν οὖν καταλάβωμεν, μετὰ μίαν δύο, εἴ πως εἰσί, σκοπεῖν, εἰ δὲ μή, τρεῖς ἢ τιν᾽ ἄλλον ἀριθμόν, καὶ τῶν ἓν ἐκείνων ἕκαστον πάλιν ὡσαύτως, μέχρι περ ἂν τὸ κατ᾽ ἀρχὰς ἓν μὴ ὅτι ἓν καὶ πολλὰ καὶ ἄπειρά ἐστι μόνον ἴδῃ τις, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὁπόσα· τὴν δὲ τοῦ ἀπείρου ἰδέαν πρὸς τὸ πλῆθος μὴ προσφέρειν, πρὶν ἄν τις τὸν ἀριθμὸν αὐτοῦ πάντα κατίδῃ τὸν μεταξὺ τοῦ ἀπείρου τε καὶ τοῦ ἑνός· τότε δ᾽ ἤδη τὸ ἓν ἕκαστον τῶν πάντων εἰς τὸ ἄπειρον μεθέντα χαίρειν ἐᾶν. Οἱ μὲν οὖν θεοί, ὅπερ εἶπον, οὕτως ἡμῖν παρέδοσαν σκοπεῖν καὶ μανθάνειν καὶ διδάσκειν ἀλλήλους· οἱ δὲ νῦν τῶν ἀνθρώπων σοφοὶ ἓν μέν, ὅπως ἄν τύχωσι, καὶ πολλὰ θᾶττον καὶ βραδύτερον ποιοῦσι τοῦ δέοντος, μετὰ δὲ τὸ ἓν ἄπειρα εὐθύς, τὰ δὲ μέσα αὐτοὺς ἐκφεύγει.

26b

. . . ἐκ τούτων ὧραί τε καὶ ὅσα καλὰ πάνθ᾽ ἡμῖν γέγονε, τῶν τ᾽ ἀπείρων καὶ τῶν πέρας ἐχόντων συμμιχθέντων . . .

[πέρας, sc. (25e) . . . τὴν [φύσιν] τοῦ ἴσου καὶ διπλασίου, χαὶ ὁπόση παύει πρὸς ἄλληλα τἀναντία διαφόρως ἔχοντα, σύμμετρα δὲ καὶ σύμφωνα ἐνθεῖσ᾽ ἀριθμὸν ἀπεργάζεται.**]**

31d

Λέγω τοίνυν τῆς ἁρμονίας μὲν λυομένης ἡμῖν ἐν τοῖς ζῴοις ἅμα λύσιν τῆς φύσεως καὶ γένεσιν ἀλγηδόνων ἐν τῷ τότε γίγνεσθαι χρόνῳ. Πάλιν δ᾽ ἁρμοττομένης τε καὶ εἰς τὴν αὐτῆς φύσιν ἀπιούσης ἡδονὴν γίγνεσθαι λεκτέον, εἰ δεῖ δι᾽ ὀλίγων περὶ μεγίστων ὅτι τάχιστα ῥηθῆναι.

No more beautiful path exists and none could exist. I am forever in love with it, but often it escapes me and leaves me abandoned, not knowing what to do . . . This is a gift from the gods to men, at least that is obvious to me; and from somewhere in the abode of the gods it was thrown by a Prometheus together with a very luminous fire; and the ancients, who were better than us and lived nearer to the gods, have transmitted this tradition to us. Here it is. It is that the realities called eternal proceed from the one and the many and have enrooted 251
in them limit and indeterminacy. We should therefore, since there is this eternal order in things, seek and postulate a unity in whichever domain. We shall find

it, for it is there. If we have grasped it, we must, after unity, consider duality, if it is there, or else triadicity, or every other number. Next the same must be done for each of these subordinate unities. By the end, what was at the beginning one appears at the same time not only as one and many and unlimited, but also with a number. Indeterminacy must not be applied to the plurality until one has had a complete view of the number of the plurality, the number which is intermediate between indeterminacy and unity. Only then should one allow the specific unity of all things to be lost in indeterminacy. The gods therefore, as I was saying, have transmitted to us this method of seeking, learning and teaching. The learned men of today create unity haphazardly, and plurality more quickly and more slowly than one should, and pass directly from unity to indeterminate things; what is intermediate escapes them. [16b–17a]

— — — — — — — —

It is out of this that the seasons and all that is beautiful for us are made, out of things indeterminate and that which contains limit, from the fact that there is a mixture.[26b]

[(limit is) "the nature of the equal and the double and of all that inhibits things contrary to each other from differing, putting them rather in proportion and in accord by impressing number into them."**]**[25e]

— — — — — — — —

I say therefore that when harmony is unravelled among us, within living beings, nature is unravelled at the same time and pain appears. When there is harmony once again and a return to the original nature, joy appears, if one must speak in a few words, as briefly as possible, of such great matters.[31d]

Epinomis, 990d

Ταῦτα δὲ μαθόντι τούτοις ἐφεξῆς ἐστὶν ὃ καλοῦσι μὲν σφόδρα γελοῖον ὄνομα γεωμετρίαν, τῶν οὐκ ὄντων δὲ ὁμοίων ἀλλήλοις φύσει ἀριθμῶν ὁμοίωσις πρὸς τὴν τῶν ἐπιπέδων μοῖραν γεγονυῖά ἐστι διαφανής· ὃ δὴ
252 θαῦμα οὐκ ἀνθρώπινον, ἀλλὰ γεγονὸς θεῖον φανερὸν ἂν γίγνοιτο τῷ δυναμένῳ ξυννοεῖν. Μετὰ δὲ ταύτην, τοὺς τρὶς ηὐξημένους καί τῇ στερεᾷ φύσει ὁμοίους, τοὺς δὲ ἀνομοίους αὖ γεγονότας ἑτέρᾳ τέχνῃ ὁμοίᾳ ταύτῃ, ἣν δὴ γεωμετρίαν ἐκάλεσαν οἱ προστυχεῖς αὐτῇ γεγονότες· ὃ δὲ θεῖόν τ' ἐστὶ καὶ θαυμαστὸν τοῖς ἐγκαθορῶσί τε καὶ διανοουμένοις, ὡς περὶ τὸ διπλάσιον ἀεὶ στρεφομένης τῆς δυνάμεως καὶ τῆς ἐξ ἐναντίας ταύτῃ καθ'

ἑκαστὴν ἀναλογίαν εἶδος καὶ γένος ἀποτυποῦται πᾶσα ἡ φύσις· ἡ μὲν δὴ πρώτη τοῦ διπλασίου κατ᾽ ἀριθμόν, ἓν πρὸς δύο, κατὰ λόγον φερομένη· διπλάσιον δὲ ἡ κατὰ δύναμιν οὖσα, ἡ δ᾽ εἰς τὸ στερεόν τε καὶ ἁπτὸν πάλιν αὖ διπλάσιον, ἀφ᾽ ἑνὸς εἰς ὀκτὼ διαπορευθεῖσα· ἡ δὲ διπλασίου μὲν εἰς μέσον, ἴσως δὲ τοῦ ἐλάττονος πλέον ἔλαττόν τε τοῦ μείζονος, τὸ δ᾽ ἕτερον τῷ αὐτῷ μέρει τῶν ἄκρων αὐτῶν ὑπερέχον τε καὶ ὑπερεχόμενον—ἐν μέσῳ δὲ τοῦ ἕξ πρὸς τὰ δώδεκα ξυνέβη τό τε ἡμιόλιον καὶ ἐπίτριτον—τούτων αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ μέσῳ ἐπ᾽ ἀμφότερα στρεφομένη τοῖς ἀνθρώποις σύμφωνον χρείαν καὶ σύμμετρον ἀπενείματο παιδιᾶς ῥυθμοῦ τε καὶ ἁρμονίας χάριν, εὐδαίμονι χορείᾳ Μουσῶν δεδομένη.

He who has learned this science (arithmetic) has next to pass immediately to what is called by a really ridiculous name, geometry. It is concerned with the likening of numbers which are not naturally alike to each other, a likening made manifest through the use of plane figures. For anyone who is able to think, it is manifest that God has produced this marvel and not men. Next come numbers of the third power, alike in accordance with the properties of solids, and those not alike are made to be so by a skill just like the one which had been called geometry when it was discovered. What is supernatural and miraculous for those who contemplate and who think is that, while power unfolds perpetually around duplication, the whole of nature is stamped by the form and the essence of the opposite relationship, and this is so in each proportion. First that of the numeric double, the relation between one and two, transposed proportionally. Next the proportion which is duplicative depending on the power, and the one which is doubled yet again, reaching all the way to the solid and palpable, stretching from one to eight. And in the relation between one and two there are means, the arithmetic mean, at equal distance from the smallest and the largest, the harmonic mean, which exceeds the smallest and is 253
exceeded by the largest in the same ratio—so eight and nine between six and twelve—; between these two means, lying at equal distance from both, is the relation of which I speak, by which men have received a share in making use of voices in unison, and of proportion, in order to learn rhythm and harmony, which is a gift from the blessed choir of the Muses.(990d)

Timaeus, 31c-32a.

Δύο δὲ μόνω καλῶς ξυνίστασθαι τρίτου χωρὶς οὐ δυνατόν· δεσμὸν γὰρ ἐν μέσῳ δεῖ τινα ἀμφοῖν ξυναγωγὸν γίγνεσθαι. Δεσμῶν δὲ κάλλιστος ὃς ἂν αὐτὸν καὶ τὰ ξυνδούμενα ὅτι μάλιστα ἓν ποιῇ. Τοῦτο δὲ πέφυκεν ἀναλογία κάλλιστα ἀποτελεῖν. Ὁπόταν γὰρ ἀριθμῶν τριῶν εἴτε ὄγκων εἴτε δυνάμεων

ὠντινωνοῦν ᾗ τὸ μέσον, ὅτιπερ τὸ πρῶτον πρὸς αὐτό, τοῦτο αὐτὸ πρὸς τὸ ἔσχατον, καὶ πάλιν αὖθις ὅτι τὸ ἔσχατον πρὸς τὸ μέσον, τὸ μέσον πρὸς τὸ πρῶτον, τότε τὸ μέσον μὲν πρῶτον καὶ ἔσχατον γιγνόμενον, τὸ δ᾽ ἔσχατον καὶ τό πρῶτον αὖ μέσα ἀμφότερα, πάνθ᾽ οὕτως ἐξ ἀναγκῆς τὰ αὐτὰ εἶναι ξυμβήσεται, τὰ αὐτὰ δὲ γενόμενα ἀλλήλοις ἓν πάντα ἔσται.

Two things, so long as there are only two, are impossible to fit together well without a third. A link must occur between them, in the middle, that brings them into union. The finest of links is the one that makes itself and the connected terms perfectly into one. It is geometric proportion which is by nature the finest to this end. For when out of three numbers, or three volumes or some other quantity, the intermediate one is to the last one as the first one is to it, and reciprocally the last to the intermediate as the intermediate to the first, then the intermediate becomes first and last; moreover the first and the last become both intermediate; thus necessarily all come to be identical; and, being identified with each other, they will be one.

Gospel. J[ohn] 17,11.

πάτερ ἅγιε, τήρησον αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί σου ᾧ δέδωκάς μοι, ἵνα ὦσιν
254 ἓν καθὼς ἡμεις . . . **[**17, 21**]** ἵνα πάντες ἓν ὦσιν, καθὼς σύ, πάτερ, ἐν ἐμοὶ κἀγὼ ἐν σοι, ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ὦσιν . . . κἀγὼ τὴν δόξαν ἣν δέδωχάς μοι δέδωκα αὐτοῖς, ἵνα ὦσιν ἓν καθῶς ἡμεῖς ἕν· ἐγὼ ἐν αὐτοῖς καὶ σὺ ἐν ἐμοί, ἵνα ὦσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἕν.

Holy father, keep them in your name, those that you have given me, that they may be one as we are . . . , so that all may be one as you, father, are in me and I in you; so that they also may be in us . . . And the glory that you have given me, I have given it to them, so that they may be one as we are one. *That I may be in them and you in me, so that they may be made perfect in unity*.

17, 18—καθὼς ἐμὲ ἀπέστειλας εἰς τὸν κόσμον, κἀγὼ ἀπέστειλα αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸν κόσμον.

As you have sent me into the world, so too have I sent them into the world.

10, 14—᾽Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ποιμήν ὁ καλός, καὶ γινώσκω τὰ ἐμὰ καὶ γινώσχουσί με τὰ ἐμὰ καθὼς γινώσχει με ὁ πατὴρ κἀγὼ γινώσκω τὸν πατέρα.

I am the good shepherd, and I know mine own and mine own know me as the Father knows me and I know the Father.

15, 9[-10]—Καθὼς ἠγάπησέν με ὁ πατήρ, κἀγὼ ὑμᾶς ἠγάπησα· μείνατε ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ τῇ ἐμῇ. ἐὰν τὰς ἐντολάς μου τηρήσητε, μενεῖτε ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ μου, καθως ἐγὼ τοῦ πατρός μου τὰς ἐντολὰς τετήρηκα καὶ μενω αὐτου ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ.

As the Father has loved me, so too have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I too have kept the commandments of my Father and I abide in his love.

Symposium, 202d[-e]

. . . ὁ Ἔρως . . . δαίμων μέγας· καὶ γὰρ πᾶν τὸ δαιμόνιον μεταξύ ἐστι θεοῦ τε καὶ θνητοῦ . . . ἐν μέσῳ δ᾽ὂν ἀμφοτέρων συμπληροῖ, ὥστε τὸ πᾶν αὐτὸ αὑτῷ ξυνδεδέσθαι.

Love . . . is a great "daimon." And that which is "daimon" is intermediate between God and man . . . being in the middle of the two, it fills the distance so that the whole might be linked together. 255

Symposium, 210[c-]d

. . . ἵν᾽ ἴδῃ αὖ τὸ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν κάλλος . . . ἐπὶ τὸ πολὺ πέλαγος τετραμμένος τοῦ καλοῦ . . .

. . . so that he might see the beauty of the sciences . . . turning towards the vast sea of the beautiful . . .

Fragment of Anaximander[9]

. . . ἐξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσίς ἐστι τοῖς οὖσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεών· διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δὶκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοισ τῆσ ἀδικίασ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν.

. . . Such is the starting point for the birth of things, and the endpoint of their destruction, which occurs in conformity with necessity; for they are each subject to a penalty and a reparation from the other, because of their injustice, according to the order of time.

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9 DK12A9, KRS101. Here we have also used the KRS numbering system of Kirk, Raven and Schofield in their *The Presocratic Philosophers*.

The ancient historians of philosophy have passed on some Pythagorean sayings to us, some of them clear and marvellous like this one which perhaps concerns bodily death, but certainly detachment: Μηδ' ἀποδημοῦντα ἐπιστρέφεσθαι (*mêd' apodêmounta epistrephesthai*), "Let him who leaves the country not look back."[10] (Cf. Luke, 9:62, "Whoever puts his hand to the plough and looks back shall not be sent into the kingdom of God.") And also, "On entering a temple, worship, speak not of nor act upon anything temporal."[11]—"He who follows the divine is above all master of his tongue."[12] (Cf. Epistle of St. James.)—"Look not upon yourself in a mirror beside a lamp."[13] (which means perhaps think not of yourself when thinking of God.)—"Lack not faith in any marvel concerning the gods and divine dogmas."—"Do not gnaw at your heart."[14]—"What is most just, is sacrifice; what is most wise, is number."[15]—This strikes a singular note, "Do not break bread, for it is not advantageous for the judgment of the other world."[16]

256 Some sayings are very obscure, like this one that Aristotle cites with disdain: ἡ δικαιοσύνη ἀριθμὸς ἰσάκισ ἴσος (*hê dikaiosunê arithmos isakis isos*), "justice is a number to the second power."[17] Or this one, cited by Diogenes Laertius: φιλίαν ἐναρμόνιον ἰσότητα (*philian enarmonion isotêta*), "friendship is an equality composed of harmony."[18]

The keys to these two sayings and many others cited above are the ideas of mean proportional, and of mediation in the theological sense, the first being the image of the second.

It is known that among the Pythagoreans one is the symbol of God. Several testimonies, including that of Aristotle, maintain this of Plato.[19] Heraclitus too, very close to the Pythagoreans in many regards—contrary to common opinion—said, "The one, this unique sage, wants and wants not to be called Zeus."[20]

10 The editors of the *Oeuvres complètes* suggest that this refers to fragment DK58C6, which talks of not diverting from a journey once begun.
11 DK58C6.
12 DK58C6.
13 DK58C6.
14 DK58C6.
15 DK58C4.
16 DK58C4.
17 DK58B4.
18 DK58B1.
19 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A (I) 987b15–987b32.
20 Heraclitus, *Fragment* 32, KRS 228.

The Pythagoreans regarded created things as each having a number as its symbol. It matters little here how they conceived this number or the link between the number and the thing.

Among numbers, some have a special link with oneness. These are the numbers which are of the second power or the squares. Through a mediation there is between them and oneness an equality of relations.

$$\frac{1}{3} = \frac{3}{9}$$

When the Son of God is within a rational creature as the Father is within the Son, that creature is perfectly just. Plato says in the *Theaetetus* that justice is likening to God.[21] Likeness, in the geometric sense, means proportion. The rather mysterious saying of the Pythagoreans and that of Plato, which seems unambiguous, have the same meaning. The just is anyone who becomes to the Son of God as the Son is to his Father. Undoubtedly this identity of relations is not literally possible. Yet the perfection offered to man must be something like this, for in many of the sayings of St. John the same words are repeated so as to indicate the relation of the disciples to Christ and of Christ to his Father. The allusion to the mathematical formulation of proportion is obvious.

The passage from the *Timaeus* on proportion could be interpreted as apply- 257
ing solely to mathematics if there were not several clear indications of the opposite meaning. First, in the passage itself. "The finest of links is the one that makes itself and the connected terms into one to the highest degree."[22] This condition is not actually realised unless not only the first term, but also the link itself, is one, that is to say God. This interpretation, it is true, is not required. But Plato employs the same word, link, to define Love's mediating function between the divine and man in the *Symposium*. Then the words of Proclus are clear, "Plato teaches us many marvellous doctrines concerning the divine by means of mathematical concepts."[23]

Clearer still is this sentence from Philolaus (to be joined to those cited above):

> ἴδοις δέ χα οὐ μόνον ἐν τοῖς δαιμονίοις καὶ θείοις πράγμασι τὰν τῶ ἀριθμῶ φύσιν καὶ τὰν δύναμιν ἰσχύουσαν, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρωπικοῖς ἔργοις καὶ

21 *Theaetetus* 176b.

22 *Timaeus* 31c.

23 Proclus, *A Commentary on the First Book of Euclid's* Elements, 22.11.

> λόγοις πᾶσι παντᾶ καὶ κατὰ τὰς δημιουργίας τᾶς τεχνιχὰς πάσας καὶ κατὰ τὰν μουσικάν. (DK44B11)
>
> *idois de ka ou monon en tois daimoniois kai theiois pragmasi tan tô arithmô phusin kai tan dunamin ischuousan, alla kai en tois anthrôpikois ergois kai logois pâsi panta kai kata tas dêmiourgias tas technikas pasas kai kata tan mousikan.*
>
> One can see what potency the nature and inherent power of number possesses, not only in religious and divine matters, but also everywhere in human doing and reasoning and in all the work of the various skills and in music.

(Religious and divine matters, δαιμονίοις καὶ θείοις πράγμασι (*daimoniois kai theiois pragmasi*), that is to say, if one refers back to the *Symposium*, that which concerns God as such and as Mediator.)

This is clear. It is as if Philolaus was saying: One would be wrong to believe that mathematics applies only to theology. It also applies, through an extension, through the effect of a marvellous coincidence, to human affairs, to music, to skills.

258 If the *Timaeus* passage on proportion has in addition to its obvious sense a theological sense, this sense can only be that of the words of Christ cited by St. John, which are so very similar.

The allusion is evident. Just as Christ recognised himself as Isaiah's man of sorrows, and the Messiah of all the prophets of Israel, he also recognised himself as that mean proportional about which the Greeks had been thinking so intensely for centuries.

If one considers whole numbers, one sees two kinds in them; those which are linked to the unit through a mean proportional, 4, 9, 16, on the one side, and on the other side all the others. If the first ones are an image of perfect justice, as the Pythagoreans had said, we are like the others, we who are in sin.

Was it owing to intensely seeking a mediation for these miserable numbers that the Greeks discovered geometry? Such an origin for geometry would accord well with the words of Philolaus cited above, and also with those of the *Epinomis*, a work that feels wholly saturated with Plato's oral teaching, "What one ridiculously calls geometry, which is the likening of numbers not naturally alike to each other, a likening made manifest through

the use of plane figures; a marvel which comes from God and not men, as is manifest for anyone able to think."[24]

These lines define geometry as the science of what is today called the real number, of which the square root of two or of any other non-square number is an example. They define geometry precisely as the science of irrational square roots.

The idea of similar triangles, attributed to Thales, relates to proportion, but not to mediation. It involves a proportion in four terms: $\frac{a}{b} = \frac{c}{d}$. One cannot, in the absence of textual evidence, either accept or reject the possibility that Thales, in studying it, had it in mind to facilitate the study of mediation (that is, proportion in three terms: $\frac{a}{b} = \frac{b}{c}$).

It is certain however that if, having knowledge only of the requirements for similar triangles, one poses the problem: Find the mean proportional between two segments, then some carefully orchestrated steps in one's thinking can lead to transforming the stated problem into this one: Con- 259
struct a right-angled triangle given the hypotenuse and the point at the base of its height.

The inscription of the right-angled triangle in the circle, which provides the solution to this second problem, is the problem for which it is said Pythagoras offered a sacrifice.

In any case, whether or not geometry had been from its very beginning a search for mediation, it offered this marvel of a mediation for the numbers that were naturally lacking it. This marvel was for a long time, it is said, one of the great Pythagorean secrets. Or more precisely, their secret was the incommensurability of the terms in such a proportion. It was wrongly believed that they kept this marvel secret because it refuted their system; such baseness would not have been worthy of them.

With them the words ἀριθμόσ (*arithmos*) and λόγος (*logos*) were synonyms. They called incommensurable relations λόγοι ἄλόγοι (*logoi alogoi*). Linking numbers that are not square to the unit requires a mediation that comes from without, from a domain foreign to number, which can only perform this function at the price of a contradiction. This mediation between the unit and number is apparently something less than number, something indeterminate. A "logos alogos" is a scandal, an absurdity, a thing against nature.

24 *Epinomis* 990d.

The Greeks experienced an additional wonder, as the *Epinomis* shows, at finding this mediation in perceptible nature, like a hallmark, a seal of the ultimate truth. For example in music. The scale does not contain the geometric mean as a note, but it is arranged symmetrically around it; there is the same geometric mean between a note and its octave and between the fourth and the fifth. One sees it at once in the numbers 6, 8, 9, 12, since $\sqrt{6\times12} = \sqrt{8\times9}$. The fourth and the fifth are themselves two kinds of mean between the notes of the octave (since $\frac{8-6}{6} = \frac{12-8}{12}$, and 12–9 = 9–6). That, according to the *Epinomis*, is the principle of musical harmony.[25] In the *Symposium* it is said that harmony is an identity of relations, *homologia*, a term which in its strictest sense must designate proportion.

All Greek science in all its branches is nothing but a search for proportions of either three or four terms. That is how the Greeks invented the concept of
260 function, which is simply the idea of two quantities that vary proportionally without ceasing to be linked by a fixed relation. The first and most brilliant application of this concept to the study of nature is Archimedes' theory of floating bodies, a purely geometric theory. What we call, in our scientific conception of the world, a law is nothing other than the application of the concept of a function to nature.

The soul of our science is demonstrative proof.[26] The experimental method differs from the crudest empiricism only by the role deduction plays in it. According to the documents currently in our possession, the Greeks seem to be the first to have transferred demonstrative proof outside the domain of whole numbers by the invention of geometry and its application to the study of nature.

It is marvellous, it is indescribably intoxicating to think that it is the love of and the desire for Christ which brought forth in Greece the invention of demonstrative proof. As long as the relations of lines and surfaces were only studied with a view to a practical application, they did not need to be certain, they could be approximate.

The Greeks had such a need of certainty concerning divine truths that even in the simple image of these truths they had to have maximum certainty. Maybe from the beginning of time men looked upon whole numbers as being suitable for providing images of divine truths because of their perfect

25 *Epinomis* 991b.

26 The French word 'dèmonstration' implies showing something, as in a proof by demonstration. For that reason it is translated here as 'demonstrative proof'.

precision, their certainty, and at the same time the mystery contained in the relations between them. But what is self-evident in the relations between whole numbers is still close to sensibility.

The Greeks found something self-evident of a much higher level through the investigation of non-numerical proportions just as exact as those in which all the terms are whole numbers. They thus found an even more suitable image of divine truths.

That their attachment to geometry was of a religious nature can be seen not only in a few texts which testify to it, but also from the most mysterious fact that until Diophantus, an author in an age of decadence, they had no algebra. The Babylonians, around two thousand years before the Christian era, had an algebra for equations with numerical coefficients of the second and even the third and fourth powers. It can hardly be doubted that the Greeks knew this algebra. They wanted none of it. Their algebraic expertise, which was very advanced, is all contained in their geometry.

Then again, it was not the results that mattered to them, the quantity or 261
importance of the theorems discovered, but only the rigour of the demonstrative proofs. Those who were not thus minded were regarded with contempt.

The idea of real number, provided through the mediation between any given number and the unit, was a matter of demonstrative proofs as rigorous, as clear, as those of arithmetic, and at the same time beyond the compass of the imagination. This idea forces the intelligence to grasp with certainty relations that it is incapable of visualising. This is an admirable introduction to the mysteries of faith.

Through this one can conceive an order of certainty, starting from uncertain and easily grasped thoughts about the sensible world all the way to completely certain and completely ungraspable thoughts concerning God.

Mathematics is doubly a mediation between these two. It has the intermediate degree of certainty, and the intermediate degree of inconceivability. It contains the kernel of the necessity that governs sensible things and images of divine truths. Lastly, it has at its core the very idea of mediation.

It is easy to understand why the Greeks, when they observed this poetry, should have been intoxicated by it; they had the right to see a revelation in it.

Today we can no longer conceive this, because we have lost this idea that absolute certainty is appropriate only to divine things. We want certainty for material things. For things that concern God belief is enough for us. It is true that mere belief might very well come to have the strength of certainty when

it is made white-hot by the fire of collective feeling, but it remains no less belief. Its strength is deceptive.

Our intelligence has become so crude that we can no longer even conceive that there could be an authentic and rigorous certainty concerning incomprehensible mysteries. On this point, an infinitely valuable use of mathematics could be made. It is irreplaceable in this regard.

The requirement for perfect rigour that was present in the Greek geometers has disappeared with them, and only in the last fifty years have mathematicians come back to it. Today, it is still for them only an ideal analogous to that of art for art's sake among the Parnassian poets. But it is one of the cracks through which true Christianity can once again filter into the modern world.

262 The requirement for rigour is not something material. When that requirement is absolute, it is in mathematics so obviously disproportionate to its object, namely the relations of quantity, and to what is necessary, namely an axiomatic reduction of all theorems to a few arbitrarily chosen axioms. In mathematics, this requirement itself is self-defeating. One day it shall be seen there as a requirement operating in a vacuum. On that day it will be close to being satisfied. The need for certainty will have found its true object.

God's mercy precludes mathematics from lapsing into mere technique. Where mathematics is cultivated on the technical level only, it does not succeed even on the technical level; that experiment was tried in Russia. Technical applications in relation to pure science are among those things that are produced only as a by-product and that are never found if one seeks them directly. This providential arrangement has kept alive at the heart of our so basely material civilisation a core of science that is theoretical, rigorous and pure. This core is one of the cracks through which the breath and the light of God can penetrate. Another crack is the pursuit of beauty in art. A third crack is affliction. Entry must be made by way of these cracks, not by way of the intact parts.

The formula, "Friendship is an equality composed of harmony" (*philian einai enarmonion isotêta*—φιλίαν εἶναι ἐναρμόνιον ἰσότητα), is filled with marvellous meanings, in relation to God, in relation to the union of God and man, and in relation to men, provided one takes into account the Pythagorean sense of the word harmony. Harmony is proportion. It is also the unity of opposites.

To apply this formula to God, it must be put alongside a definition of harmony that is at first sight rather strange: δίχα φρονεόντων συμφρόνησις (*dicha phroneontôn sumphronêsis*), "the common thought of those thinking separately."

As for separate thinkers who are thinking together, there is only one thing that realises this in the strict sense, that is the Trinity.

Aristotle's formula, "thought is the thought of thought" does not contain the Trinity because the noun can be taken equally in the active or the passive sense.[27] Philolaus' formulation contains it because the verb is active.

Meditation on this formulation leads to the best way of giving an account of the dogma of the Trinity to the intelligence.

If God is thought of solely as one, then he is thought of either as a thing, and thus he is not act, or as a subject, and thus, in order to have actuality, he 263
needs an object, in consequence of which creation would be necessity and not love. God would not be solely love and good.

We human beings, being subjects who are only such through continual contact with an object, we cannot conceive of God as perfect except by conceiving of him as being at the same time subject and object.

But God is essentially subject, thinking and not thought. His name is "I am."[28] It is his name qua subject, it is also his name qua object, it is also his name qua contact between subject and object.

All human thought implies three terms, a subject who thinks and who is a person, an object thought of, and the thought itself, which is the contact between the two. Aristotle's formula, "Thought is the thought of thought" designates these three terms, on condition that one takes the word thought each time in a different sense.

For us to represent God to ourselves as a thinking thought and not as a thing, we have to represent these three terms within divine thought, but divine dignity requires that these three terms be each one a Person, even though there is only one God. Divine dignity precludes the word thought, when it concerns God, ever being taken in the passive; the verb to think, with God as subject, can only be taken in the active. That which God is thinking of is no less a being which thinks. This is why it is said to be the Son, or the Image, or the Wisdom of God.

That is perfect thinking as far as us men can grasp its inconceivable character. Any other representation of it that we are able to create for ourselves is easier to imagine, but is infinitely far from perfection. That is why the intelligence can adopt the dogma of the Trinity wholeheartedly and without any uncertainty, even though it is unable to comprehend it.

If the definition of friendship is interpreted as an equality composed of harmony by using the definition of harmony as the common thought of

27 *Metaphysics* Lambda (12) 1074b34.
28 Ex 3:14.

those thinking separately, then it is the Trinity itself that is friendship par excellence. The equality is the equality between one and many, between one and two; the opposites whose harmony constitutes oneness are unity and plurality, which are the first pair of opposites. This is why Philolaus speaks on the one hand of the one as the first origin, and on the other of unity as being the first to be put together. The latter he called Hestia, the central hearth, the central fire;[29] and fire always corresponds to the Holy Spirit. The formula,
264 "Friendship is an equality composed of harmony," contains moreover the two relations within the Trinity specified by St. Augustine, equality and connection. The Trinity is the supreme harmony and the supreme friendship.

Harmony is the unity of opposites. The first pair of opposites is one and two, unity and plurality, and it constitutes the Trinity. (Plato probably also had in mind the Trinity as the first harmony when, in the *Timaeus*, he called the terms of the first pair of opposites the Same and the Different.)[30] The second pair of opposites is the opposition between the creator and the creature. In the Pythagorean language, this opposition is expressed as correlation between that which limits and that which is unlimited, that is to say that which receives its limitation from outside. The active principle of all limitation is God. Creation is matter being put into order by God, and this ordering-action by God consists in imposing limits. That to be sure is also the conception in Genesis. These limits are either quantities or something analogous to quantity. Thus, taking the word in its widest sense, one can say that limit is number. Hence Plato's formula, "Number is the intermediary between the one and the unlimited."[31] The supreme one is God, and it is he who limits.

In the *Philebus* Plato indicates the first two pairs of opposites in order and marks the hierarchy that separates them when he writes, "The reality called eternal proceeds from the one and the many and has enrooted in itself limit and unlimited." Limit and unlimited is creation, whose root is in God. The one and the many is the Trinity, the first origin. Number appears in the Trinity as the second term of the opposition, and, if one identifies it with limit, it appears in the principle of creation as the first term. It is therefore something very much like a mean proportional. One must not forget that in Greek *arithmos* and *logos* are two exactly synonymous terms. The conception Plato expounds at the beginning of the *Philebus*, a conception

29 DK58B37.

30 *Timaeus* 35b-c. This parenthetical remark was added in the margin.

31 *Philebus* 16d-e.

of marvellous depth and fecundity, is that every study and every skill, for example the study of language, of the alphabet, of music, and so on, must reproduce on its own level the order of this primordial hierarchy, namely oneness, number in the widest sense, and unlimited. In this way the intelligence is an image of faith.

Since in God as creator there is a second pair of opposites, there is also in God a harmony and a friendship which is not defined by the dogma of 265
the Trinity alone. It is necessary that there also be in God unity between the creative and ordering principle of limitation and the inert matter which is indeterminacy. This requires that not only the principle of limitation, but also inert matter and the union between the two be divine Persons, since there can be no relation in God whose terms are not Persons, including the link that links them. But inert matter does not think, it cannot be a person.

The insoluble difficulties are solved by passing to the limit.[32] There is an intersection between a person and inert matter; this intersection is a human being at the moment of his death, when the circumstances preceding his death have been brutal to the point of making a thing of him. This is a dying slave, a miserable bit of flesh nailed on a cross.

If this slave is God, if he is the second Person of the Trinity, if he is united to the First by the divine link which is the third Person, then one has the perfection of harmony as the Pythagoreans conceived it, the harmony where there is the maximum distance and the maximum unity between opposites. "The common thought of those thinking separately." There can be no thought more one than the thought of the one and only God. There cannot be thinking beings more separate than the Father and the Son at the moment when the Son utters the eternal cry, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" This moment is the incomprehensible perfection of love. It is the love that outstrips all understanding.

The ontological argument, the argument from perfection, which moreover is not an argument to the intelligence as such, but only to the intelligence animated by love, this argument does not posit only the reality of God, but also the dogmas of the Trinity, of the Incarnation and of the Passion. This does not mean, of course, that these dogmas might be found through human reason without revelation; but having become apparent, they impose

32 This is a mathematical turn of phrase in the integral calculus; it means going to the limit of precision, into the realm of the negligible, and the infinite approximation.

themselves with such certainty on the intelligence, if only it is enlightened by love, that it cannot refuse to adopt them, even though they are outside its domain and it lacks the capacity to affirm or deny them. God is perfect only as Trinity, and the love which constitutes the Trinity finds its perfection only in the cross.

God wanted to give his Son many brothers.[33]

266 The Pythagorean definition of friendship applies wonderfully both to our friendship with God and to friendships between men.

"Friendship is an equality composed of harmony." If one takes harmony in the sense of a geometric mean, and if one supposes that the only mediation between God and man is a being that is both God and man, then one passes directly from this Pythagorean formula to the marvellous sayings from the Gospel of John. Through the likening with Christ, who with God is but one, the human being attains, lying in the depths of his misery, a kind of equality with God, an equality that is love. St. John of the Cross, speaking of spiritual marriage with the authority of experience, repeats constantly that within the supreme union God wants through love to establish a kind of equality between the soul and Him. St. Augustine also says, "God was made man so that man might be made god."[34] Harmony is the principle of this kind of equality, harmony, that is to say the link between opposites, the mean proportional, Christ. It is not directly between God and man that there is something analogous to a link of equality, it is between two relations.

When Plato, in the *Gorgias*, speaks of geometric equality, this phrase is probably exactly equivalent to harmonic equality as used by Pythagoras. Both terms are probably technical expressions whose sense was strictly defined, namely as equality between two relations having a common term, of the type $a/b = b/c$. This is because the adjective geometric in terms such as geometric mean, or geometric progression, indicates proportion. The passages from John cited above have this appearance of an algebraic formula so clearly and so insistently, that it is obvious that this is intended and there is an allusion in it. Plato could indeed say legitimately, "Geometric equality has a great potency both upon gods and upon men."[35] Following the above

33 This may be an allusion to Rom 8:29.

34 Loose paraphrase of Augustine's Sermon 192.

35 *Gorgias* 508a.

definition of friendship, the other phrase from the same passage, "friendship unites heaven and earth, gods and men,"[36] has exactly the same meaning. By inscribing at the entrance of his school, "No one enters through here unless he is a geometer," Plato was no doubt asserting in the form of an enigma and a pun almost the truth that Christ expressed by the statement, "No one goes to the Father if not through me."[37] Plato's other formula, "God is a perpetual geometer," has no doubt a double meaning and refers both to the order of the world and the mediating function of the Word. In sum, the appearance of geometry in Greece is the most striking of all the prophecies that heralded 267
Christ. This makes it understandable that as a result of its infidelity science should have become in part a source of evil, just as the devil entered Judas when he had received bread from Christ's hand. Indifferent things stay forever indifferent; it is divine things that as a result of the withholding of love assume a diabolical efficacy. There seems to be something diabolical in the influence of science on spiritual life since the Renaissance. It would be in vain to try to remedy this by keeping science to the domain of nature alone. It is false that it is altogether a part of this domain. It is part of it only with respect to its results and its practical applications, but not in its inspiration; for in science as in art anything genuinely new is the work of genius; and true genius, unlike talent, is supernatural. Neither is it a part of the domain of nature with respect to its action on the soul since, as it reinforces faith or diverts from it, it cannot be indifferent. Were it once again to become faithful to its origin and its purpose, demonstrative rigour in mathematics would be to charity what musical technique is to charity in Gregorian plainsong. There is a higher degree of musical technique in Gregorian chant than even in Bach or Mozart; Gregorian chant is at once pure technique and pure love, as is indeed all great art. It should be exactly the same for science which, like art, is nothing other than a certain reflection of the beauty of the world. It was so in Greece. Demonstrative rigour is the substance of the geometric art as stone is the substance of sculpture.

The Pythagorean definition of friendship, applied to God and to man, reveals mediation as being essentially love, and love as being essentially mediator. This is also what Plato conveys in the *Symposium*.

36 *Gorgias* 507e–508a.
37 Jn 14:6.

The same definition applies also to friendship between men, although here there is greater difficulty, since Philolaus said, "Things of the same kind, of the same root and of the same level do not need harmony." It is significant that the Pythagoreans should have chosen a definition of friendship that only applies lastly to relations between men. Friendship is first friendship within God between divine Persons. It is next friendship between God and man. Only lastly is it friendship between two men or more. This hierarchy did not
268 prevent human friendship from having existed among the Pythagoreans in its perfection, given that one finds among them the most celebrated pair of friends, Damon and Pythias. Aristotle was probably inspired by the Pythagorean tradition when placing friendship among the virtues. If Iamblichus did not exaggerate too much, the Pythagoreans recognised and practised among themselves to an admirable degree a commandment similar to the last one that Christ left to his disciples, "Love one another."

The Pythagorean definition applies to men because even though they are in fact of the same kind, the same root, and the same level, they are not so in their thought. Each man is himself I, and the others are the others. I, that is to say the centre of the world; this central position is shown spatially by perspective. The others, that is to say the particles of the universe, are more or less significant according to whether they are more or less near to I, most of them are practically nothing. It might happen that a man transfers the central position outside himself into another human being, personally known to him or not, in whom he places his treasure and his heart. He himself then becomes just a particle of the universe, sometimes quite significant, sometimes infinitely little. Extreme fear can produce this effect as can a certain kind of love. In both cases, when for a human being the centre of the universe is located in another, this transfer is always the effect of a relationship of mechanical forces that brutely subjects the first to the second. The effect is produced if the relation between forces is such that all thought of the future in the first one, whether it be hope or fear, passes necessarily through the second. There is an essential identity with respect to the mechanical and brute character of the subordination in relations apparently as different as that which link a slave to a master, a pauper to a benefactor, an Old Guardsman to Napoleon, a certain type of lover, father, mother, sister, friend, and the like, to the object of their affection. A relation of this kind can link two human beings for a short space of time, a month, a day, a few minutes.

Except in cases where one human being is brutely made subject to another who strips him for a time of the power of thinking in the first person, everyone makes use of others as one makes use of inert things, either in fact if he has the power to do so, or in thought. There is still yet another exception. This is when two human beings meet in circumstances where neither is made subject to the other by any kind of force and each needs the other's consent in equal measure. Each one then, without ceasing to think in the 269
first person, understands in actuality that the other is also thinking in the first person. Justice then happens as a natural phenomenon. The efforts of the law-maker should strive to make these occasions as numerous as possible. But the justice which happens in this way does not constitute a harmony, and it is a justice without friendship. A formulation that Thucydides puts into the mouth of some Athenians perfectly defines the natural relations between human beings, "The human mind being made the way it is, what is just is not examined unless there is equal necessity on both sides; by contrast if one is strong and one weak, the possible is done by the first and accepted by the second."[38] He adds, "We believe in regard to gods, we are certain in regard to men that always, by a necessity of nature, each commands everywhere where he has the power to do so."[39]

Apart from the occasions where there is necessity on both sides, justice is a supernatural friendship that proceeds from harmony. Harmony is the unity of opposites; these opposites are that being which is the centre of the world and that other which is a small fragment in the world. There can be no unity unless thought performs upon everything that it encompasses an operation analogous to the one that makes it possible to perceive space by reducing illusions of perspective down to their own level. It is necessary to recognise that nothing in the world is the centre of the world, that the centre of the world is outside the world, that no one here below has the right to say I. It is necessary to renounce in favour of God, through love of Him and of truth, this illusory power to think in the first person that He has granted to us. He has granted it to us so that it might be possible for us to renounce it through love. God alone has the right to say, "I am"; "I am" is his name and is not the name of any other being. But this renunciation does not consist in

38 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, V.89.

39 This second quotation was added in the margin by Weil; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, V.105.

transferring one's own position as the centre of the world into God as some transfer it into another man. This would be to love God as Racine's Oneone loves Phaedra, as his Pylades loves Orestes. Some love God this way. Even were they to die as martyrs, this is not the true love of God. The "I am" of God, which is real, differs infinitely from the illusory "I am" of men. God is not a person in the way in which a man believes himself to be so. This is no doubt the meaning of that profound saying of the Hindus, that God must be conceived both as personal and as impersonal.

270 Only the true renunciation of the power to think anything in the first person, this renunciation which is not a mere transfer, allows a man to know that other men are his fellows. This renunciation is nothing other than the love of God, whether or not the name of God is present in the mind. This is why the two commandments are but one. By right the love of God is prior. But in fact, since for man all concrete thought has a real object here below, this renunciation has to takes place while thought is applied either to things, or to men. In the first case the love of God appears first of all as acceptance of the beauty of the world, the Stoic *amor fati*, the acceptance of that undifferentiated distribution of light and of rain which expresses here below the perfection of our heavenly Father. In the second case, the love of God appears first of all as love of one's neighbour, and above all of the weak and afflicted neighbour, the one whom, following the laws of nature, we would not notice even when passing right by him. After all, just as genuine compassion is supernatural, so too is genuine gratitude.

The renunciation of the power to think in the first person, that is the abandonment of all one's goods to follow Christ. All of a man's goods, this is the whole universe seen with himself as the centre. Men only love riches, power and social consideration because all of it reinforces their capacity to think in the first person. To accept poverty in the literal sense of the word, as Saint Francis did, that is to accept being nothing in the appearance one offers to oneself and to others just as one is nothing in reality. "If one wants to become invisible, there is no more certain way than becoming poor," says a Spanish folk song. Such an acceptance is the highest degree of the love of truth.

When one applies to men the formula, "Friendship is an equality composed of harmony," harmony means unity of opposites. The opposites are me and another, opposites so distant that they only have their unity in God. Friendship between human beings, and justice are one and the same thing,

except the cases where justice is imposed from outside by circumstances. Plato also, in the *Symposium*, indicates this identity between perfect justice and love. The Gospels, when dealing with relations between men, use the words justice and love interchangeably, with the same meaning; the word justice is used there several times on the subject of almsgiving. Those Christ thanked for having given him food when he was hungry are called the just. Two per- 271
fect friends are two men who, being in regular contact during a considerable part of their lives, are always perfectly just towards one another. An act of justice is a flash of friendship that a fleeting occasion brings forth between two men. If justice is one-way, then it as good as crippled.

In each of the three relations signified by the word friendship, God is always mediator. He is mediator between himself and himself. He is mediator between himself and man. He is mediator between one man and another man. God is essentially mediation. God is the sole principle of harmony. That is why song is appropriate for his praise.

By saying, "If two or three of you have gathered in my name, I shall be among them," Christ has promised his friends, as a boon, the infinitely precious good of human friendship.[40] But wherever in space and time two true friends are found, something most rare, Christ is among them, whatever the name of the god they invoke. All true friendship passes through Christ.

However, there is one kind of renunciation of personality and one kind of friendship where Christ is never present, even if he is explicitly and passionately invoked. This happens when one renounces the first person singular only to substitute for it the first person plural. Now the terms in the relation are no longer me and the other or else me and the others, but homogeneous fragments of us; these terms therefore are of the same kind, the same root, and the same level; consequently, using Philolaus' postulate, they cannot be linked via harmony. They are linked via themselves and without mediation. There is no distance between them, no empty space between them into which God might slip. Nothing is more contrary to friendship than solidarity, whether it be a matter of solidarity caused by camaraderie, by personal sympathy or by belonging to the same social setting, same political persuasion, same nation, or same religious denomination. The thoughts that explicitly or implicitly contain the first person plural are infinitely more remote still from justice than those which contain the first person singular; since

40 Mt 18:20.

the first person plural is not suitable for being taken as part of a three-term relation whose middle term is God. That is why Plato, most likely inspired
272 by the Pythagoreans, calls everything which is collective animal. This trap is the most dangerous set for love here below. Countless Christians have fallen into it over the centuries and are falling into it to this day.

Supernatural justice, friendship or supernatural love are found within all human relations where, without there being equality in force and in need, there is a search for mutual consent. The desire for mutual consent is charity.[41] It is an imitation of the incomprehensible charity that persuades God to let us have our autonomy.

In addition to the Trinity, the Incarnation, the charity between God and man, and the charity between men, there is a fifth form of harmony, one which concerns things. It encompasses man too insofar as man is a thing, meaning the whole man, body and soul, except the faculty of free consent. It therefore encompasses what each individual calls 'me'. This fifth form of harmony, given it does not involve a person on both sides, does not constitute a friendship. The opposites which it relates to each other are the principle that limits and that which receives limits from outside, that is to say God and inert matter as such. The intermediary is the limit, the network of limits which holds all things in a single order and of which Lao Tzu has said, "The net of heaven is very wide, but none can pass through."[42]

The idea of this pair of opposites is not at all obvious, it is even at first very obscure. It is likewise very profound. It contains all the great structures that have been put together over centuries under the name of theories of knowledge.

It is number, says Philolaus, which gives a body to things. He adds that number brings about this effect by making things knowable in conformity

41 'Charity' in English will likely call to mind charitable giving or institutions created for that purpose. The French word *charité* has a wider meaning, retained in English in expressions like a 'charitable interpretation', that suggest an effort to treat someone with kindness or good will where one can. *Charité* in French suggests a neighbourly love—it is not an attachment, like friendship or romantic love—and in that sense can be seen to be the same as love of neighbour. Weil understands the term to be suggestive of essential mutuality: *charité* is attentive to the loved one's consenting to be loved. While translating *charité* as 'charity' risks misleading the English reader, it would be more misleading to translate it as love or caring.

42 Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 73, Weil's paraphrase from memory is of a translation she had read.

with the nature of the gnomon.[43] The gnomon, if one is to take the word in its original sense, is the vertical rod on a sun dial. This rod remains fixed while its shadow rotates and changes in length. The variation in shadow is determined by the fixedness of the rod, given the revolving movement of the sun. This relation is the one that mathematics today designates under the names, invariant, and, variation group. It is one of the fundamental concepts of the human mind.

It is surprising to read that number gives a body to things. One would expect instead a form. Yet Philolaus' formula is literally true. Any close and 273
rigorous analysis of perception, illusion, daydreaming, dreaming or states more or less close to hallucination shows that the perception of the real world differs from the errors which resemble it only because it contains a contact with a necessity. (Maine de Biran, Lagneau and Alain have had the greatest insight on this point.)[44] Necessity appears to us always as a set of variation laws determined by fixed and invariant relations. Reality for the human mind is nothing other than contact with necessity. There is a contradiction in this, since necessity is intelligible, not tangible. Hence the sensation of reality forms a harmony and a mystery. We convince ourselves of the reality of an object by going around it, an operation that successively produces varying appearances determined by the fixedness of a form different from all the appearances and external to them, transcendent in relation to them. By this operation we know that the object is a thing, not a phantom, that it has a body. The relations of quantity which play the role of the gnomon therefore do indeed constitute the body of the object. Lagneau, who incidentally was probably unaware of Philolaus' formula, made this analysis by using a cuboid box. None of the appearances of the box has the form of a cube but, for someone moving around the box, the form of the cube is what determines the variation in the apparent form. This determination constitutes for us the very body of the object so well that in looking at the box we believe we see a cube, although this is never the case. The relation of the cube, which is strictly speaking never seen, to the appearances produced by perspective is like the relation between the rod of the sundial and its shadows. The example of the cube is even more lovely perhaps. Both relations can,

43 See the footnote for Philolaus' passage B11 on manuscript page 248 for the reference to the gnomon, which Weil had omitted to translate.

44 This is an addition in the margin, but it shows whom Weil had in mind.

through an analogous transposition, supply the key to all human knowledge. There is much to be had from meditating on them over and over again.

The reality of the universe is for us nothing other than necessity, whose structure is that of the gnomon, supported by something. It must have a support, for necessity is in itself essentially conditional. Without support, it is only an abstraction. Upon a support, it constitutes the very reality of creation. As for the support, we can have no conception of it. It is that which the Greeks called by a word (*apeiron*) which means unlimited as well
274 as indeterminate. It is that which Plato called the receptacle, the matrix, the impressionable stuff, the essence which is the mother of all things, and at the same time always untouched, always virginal. Water is the best image of it because it has neither form nor colour, even though it is visible and tangible. On this subject it is impossible not to observe that the words *matière, mère, mer, Marie*[45] resemble each other to the point of being almost identical. This character of water reflects its symbolic usage in baptism more than its power to cleanse.

For us matter is simply that which is subject to necessity. We know nothing else about it. Necessity, for us, is constituted by laws of quantitative variation in appearances. Where there is no quantity strictly speaking, there is something analogous. A law of quantitative variation is a function. Function is what the Greeks called number or relation, *arithmos* or *logos*, and it is function once again that forms the limit. The clearest image of function is provided by the continuous series of triangles with the same angles. This is a proportion. It is geometry that reveals the idea of function.

Necessity is an enemy for man as long as he is thinking in the first person. In truth he has the three kinds of relations with it that he has with men. Through reveries or through the exercise of social power it seems to be his slave. In vexations, privations, hardships, and suffering, but above all in affliction, it appears as an absolute and brutal master. In methodical action there is a point of equilibrium in which necessity, by its conditionality, presents man at once with obstacles and with means in relation to the partial ends that he is pursuing, and in which there is a kind of equality

45 The French words Weil uses here are "matter, mother, sea, Mary". The English translation can mirror the phonic commonality except for *mer*/sea. The Latin root of 'mer', *mare*, survives in the English 'marine'. Indeed, the English 'mere' as 'lake' derives from the Germanic 'meer' and shares a common Indo-European root with 'mare'.

between a man's will and universal necessity. This point of equilibrium is to the relations of man with the world what natural justice is to the relations between men; in the organisation of skilled work and of all human activity, effort must be made to attain it as often as possible. For the proper task of the law-maker is to create within social life, as far as possible, natural images of supernatural virtues. This active equilibrium between man and universal necessity, coupled with the equilibrium of forces and needs between men, would constitute natural happiness, if anything like it could last for long. The aspiration to natural happiness is good, healthy and precious; in the same way, it is good for the health of a child that it should be attracted to food by its taste, although the chemical composition and 275
not the taste constitutes the virtue in it. The experience of and the desire for supernatural joys do not destroy the aspiration for natural happiness in the soul, but impart to it a plenitude of meaning. Natural happiness has true value only when a perfectly pure joy is added to it by the feeling of beauty.[46] Crime and affliction by contrast, each in a different way, but with equal efficacy, forever destroy the aspiration for natural happiness.

The equilibrium between human will and necessity in methodical action is only an image; if one takes it for a reality, it is a lie. In particular what man takes for ends, are always just means. Fatigue forces one to see the illusion. In a state of extreme fatigue man ceases to identify with his own action and even his own will; he sees himself as a thing which propels other things because it is itself propelled by a compulsion. In fact, the human will, although a certain feeling of choice is irreducibly attached to it, is simply one phenomenon among all those which are subject to necessity. The proof is that it comprises limits. The infinite alone is outside the empire of necessity. In the universe, man does not experiences necessity other than as being both an obstacle to his will and a condition for accomplishment; in consequence this experience is never entirely uncontaminated with the illusions irreducibly attached to the exercise of the will. In order to think of necessity in a way that is pure, one must detach it from the matter which supports it and conceive it as a fabric of conditions knotted one to the other. This pure and conditional necessity is none other than the very object of mathematics and of certain operations of the mind analogous to mathematics, that are theoretical,

46 This sentence was added in the margin by Weil.

pure and rigorous like mathematics, but that are not given a name because they are not discerned. Contrary to a preconception quite widespread today, mathematics is above all a science of nature; or rather it is the science of nature par excellence, the only one. Every other science is simply a particular application of mathematics.

In necessity thus thought of as conditional, man is not present in any capacity; he has no part in it outside the very operation by which he thinks of it. The faculty from which this operation proceeds is obviously by its
276 nature not subject to necessity, not subject to limit and number. The purely conditional sequencing in necessity is the sequencing in demonstrative proof itself. Seen in this way, necessity is for man no longer either enemy or master. Nevertheless it is something alien and imposed. Knowledge of sensible phenomena is exclusively the recognition in them of something analogous to this purely conditional necessity. This is the case even for psychological and social phenomena. One knows them insofar as one recognises in them in a concrete and precise way, on each occasion, the presence of a necessity analogous to mathematical necessity. This is why the Pythagoreans said that only number is known. They called mathematical necessity number or relation (*logos* or *logismos*).

Mathematical necessity is an intermediary between the whole natural part of man, which is corporeal and psychical matter, and the infinitely small piece of himself that does not belong to this world. Man, much as he tries, though often in vain, to maintain in himself the illusion to the contrary, is here below the slave of the forces of nature that infinitely surpass him. This force which governs the world and makes every man obey, just as a master armed with a whip is sure to make a slave obey, this force is the same thing the human mind conceives under the name of necessity. The relation of necessity to the intelligence is no longer the relation of master to slave. Neither is it the inverse relation, nor the relation of two free men. It is the relation of the object contemplated to the contemplative looking. The faculty in man which looks at the most brute force as one looks at a painting, by giving it the name necessity, this faculty is not that in man which belongs to the other world. It is at the intersection of the two worlds. The faculty which does not belongs to this world is the faculty of consent. Man is free to consent to necessity or not. This freedom is actual in him only when he conceives force as necessity, that is to say when he contemplates it. He is not free to consent to force as such. The slave who sees the whip being raised

above him does not consent, does not refuse his consent, he trembles. Yet, under the name of necessity, it is indeed brute force that man consents to, and when he consents, it is indeed to the whip. No motive, no reason can be sufficient for such a consent. This consent is a madness, the madness intrinsic to man, just as the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Passion together constitute the madness intrinsic to God. The two madnesses answer each other. It is not surprising that this world should be above all the site of affliction, for without perpetually looming affliction no madness on the part of man could echo the madness of God, which is already entirely contained in the act of creation. For in creating, God renounces being all, he relinquishes a bit of being to what is other than Him. Creation is renunciation by love. The real answer to the excessiveness of divine love does not consist in voluntarily inflicting suffering on oneself, for the suffering one inflicts on oneself, however intense, however long, however violent, is not destructive. It is not within the power of a being to destroy itself. The real answer consists only in consenting to the possibility of being destroyed, that is to say to the possibility of affliction, whether or not the affliction in fact occurs. One never inflicts affliction on oneself, neither from love, nor perversity. At most one can, under one inspiration or another, distractedly and without realising, take two or three steps that lead to the slippery spot where one becomes prey to gravity and from where one falls onto the rocks that break one's back.

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Consent to necessity is pure love and even in some way an excessiveness of love. This love does not have necessity itself as its object nor the visible world whose fabric it constitutes. It is not in man's power to love matter as such. When a man loves an object, it is either because in his mind he shelters a portion of his past life there, sometimes also a desired future, or because this object has a connection to another human being. One loves an object which recalls a loved one, a work of art which is the achievement of a man of genius. The universe is for us a recollection; the recollection of what loved one? The universe is a work of art; what artist is its author? We do not possess answers to these questions. But when the love, from which the consent to necessity arises, is present in us, we possess the experiential proof that there is an answer. For it is not for the love of other men that we consent to necessity. The love of other men is in a sense an obstacle to this consent, since necessity crushes others as well as us. It is for the love of something which is not a human person, which is yet something like a person. For that which is not something like a person is not an object of love. Regardless of the creed professed with regard to religious

matters, including atheism, where there is authentic, unconditional, and com-
278 plete consent to necessity, there is fullness of the love of God; and nowhere else. This consent constitutes participation in the Cross of Christ.

By giving the name *Logos* to this human and divine being whom he loved above all others and to whom he was dear, John has encapsulated in one word, among several other infinitely precious thoughts, the whole Stoic doctrine of *amor fati*. This word *Logos*, borrowed from the Greek Stoics who had received it from Heraclitus, has several meanings, but the principal one is this quantitative law of variation that constitutes necessity. *Fatum* and *logos* are moreover semantically related. The *Fatum* is necessity, necessity is the *logos*, and *logos* is the very name of the object of our most ardent love.[47] The love that John bore for the one who was his friend and lord, when he was leaning against his bosom during the Last Supper, is that same love that we should bear toward the mathematical sequencing of causes and effects which from time to time turns us into a kind of formless pulp. Obviously that is mad.

One of the most profound and most obscure of Christ's sayings reveals this absurdity. The most bitter reproach that men make against necessity, is its absolute indifference to moral values. The just and the criminal alike receive the benefits of the sun and the rain; the just and the criminal alike are stricken with sunstroke, or drowned in floods. It is precisely this indifference that Christ invites us to look upon as the very expression of the perfection of our heavenly Father and to imitate it. To imitate this indifference is simply to consent to it, it is to accept the existence of all that exists, including evil, excluding only the portion of evil that we have the possibility and the obligation of preventing. By this simple statement Christ annexed all of Stoic thought, and in the same stroke Heraclitus and Plato.

It could never be proved that something as absurd as consent to necessity was possible. It can only be observed. There are as a matter of fact souls that do consent.

Necessity is precisely the intermediary between our nature and our infinitely small faculty of free consent, for our nature is subject to it and

47 The claims that Weil is making about the inter-relation between *logos* and *fatum* are subtle and several. *Fatum* means fate or what is ordained, as well as utterance, especially one that is prophetic or oracular. The meaning of *logos* is related to saying and what is said, also explanation, proportion and, beginning with Heraclitus, the organising principle of all things.

our consent accepts it. Likewise, when we think of the universe, we also think of necessity as being the intermediary between matter and God. As we consent to necessity, God by an eternal act consents to it first. But that in us which we call consent, its analogue in God we call will. God makes 279
the necessity extended throughout space and time exist by the fact that He thinks it. God's thought is God, and in this sense the Son is the image of the Father; God's thought is also the order of the world, and in this sense the Word is the orderer of the world. The order of the world, in God, is the orderer of the world, for in God everything is a subject, everything is a person.

Just as Christ is on the one hand mediator between God and man, and on the other mediator between man and his neighbour, so mathematical necessity is mediator on the one hand between God and things, and on the other between each thing and every other thing. It constitutes an order by which each thing, being in its place, allows all other things to exist. Staying within limits is for material things the equivalent of what for the human mind is consenting to the existence of others, that is to say charity towards one's neighbour. Furthermore, for man as natural being, staying within limits is justice.

Order is equilibrium and motionlessness. The universe subject to time is perpetual becoming. The energy moving it is an active principle of the disruption of an equilibrium. And yet this becoming composed of disruptions in equilibrium is in reality an equilibrium because the disruptions in equilibrium compensate for each other. This becoming is an equilibrium refracted in time. This is what is expressed by Anaximander's monumental pronouncement, a pronouncement of unfathomable depth, "It is out of indeterminacy that birth comes to be for things, it is through a return to indeterminacy that their destruction comes about in conformity with necessity; for they are each subject to a penalty and a reparation from the other, because of their injustice, according to the order of time." Considered in itself, every change, consequently every phenomenon, however small, incorporates the active principle of the destruction of the universal order. Conversely, considered in its connection with all the phenomena contained within the totality of space and time, a connection that imposes a limit on change and puts it in relation to an equal and inverse disruption in equilibrium, every phenomenon contains within itself the total presence of the order of the world.

Necessity being mediator between matter and God, we conceive God's will as having two different relationships, one with necessity and one with matter. This difference is expressed in human imagination, in an inevitably defective way, through the myth of the primal chaos wherein God establishes an order, a myth that has been wrongly blamed on ancient wisdom,
280 and that is also mentioned in Genesis. Another way of marking this difference is to relate necessity specifically to the second person of the Trinity considered either as orderer, or as the Soul of the World. The Soul of the World is nothing other than the order of the world conceived as a person. An Orphic verse suggests the same difference by saying, "Zeus fashioned the universe and Bacchus finished it."[48] Bacchus is the Word. Even though matter exists only because it is willed by God, necessity, being mediator, is closer to the will of God. Necessity is the obedience of matter to God. So the pair of opposites constituted by necessity in matter and by freedom in us has its unity in obedience, since for us to be free is nothing other than desiring to obey God. Every other freedom is a lie.

When things are conceived in this way, the idea of a miracle is no longer something that might be accepted or rejected, it no longer has any meaning at all. Or rather it has no other meaning than that of an appearance exercising a certain influence on souls at a certain level, an influence compounded of good and evil.

So long as we think in the first person, we see necessity from underneath it, from the inside; it confines us on all sides like the surface of the earth and the vault of heaven. As soon as we renounce thinking in the first person through the consent to necessity, we see it from the outside, below us, for we have passed to God's side. The side that it presented to us previously and that it still presents to almost our entire being, to the natural part of ourselves, is brute domination. The side that it presents after this operation to that fragment of our thought which has passed to the other side is pure obedience. We have become the sons of the house, and we love the docility of this slave-like necessity that we had at first taken for a master.

But the possibility of such a change in point of view is inconceivable without experience. At that moment when we resolve to consent to necessity, we cannot foresee the fruits of this consent. This consent is at first sight

48 Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's* Timaeus, Book 1. The sense here is of perfecting something, giving it the final care and polish.

truly pure absurdity. It is also truly supernatural. It is the work of grace alone. God carries it out in us without us, provided only that we should let it happen to us. When we become aware of it, the operation is already complete, we find ourselves committed without ever having made a commitment; we 281
can no longer turn away from God except through an act of perfidy.

Just as a horizontal plane is the unity of the upper side and the lower side, so necessity is for matter the intersection of obedience to God and the brute force that subjugates creatures. At this very same level of the intersection, necessity has in part an involvement in constraint, and in part involvement in intelligence, justice, beauty, and faith. The part of constraint is obvious. There is for example something hard, metallic, opaque and irreducible to the mind in the connection between the different properties of the triangle and the circle.

But just as the order of the world, in God, is a divine Person, that can be called the ordering Word or the Soul of the World, so too in us, the younger brothers, necessity is connection, that is to say, thought in action. "The eyes of the soul," says Spinoza, "are themselves demonstrative proofs."[49] It is not in our power to alter the sum of the squares of the sides of a right-angled triangle, but there is no sum if the mind does not carry it out by conceiving the demonstrative proof. Even in the domain of whole numbers one and one can remain side by side in perpetuity, they will never be two if an intelligence does not carry out the act of adding them. Attentive intelligence alone has the inherent power of carrying out the connections, and once the attention wanes the connections dissolve. No doubt there are very many connections in us attached to memory, sensibility, imagination, habit, and belief, but they do not contain necessity. The necessary connections, which constitute the very reality of the world, have no reality themselves except as an object of intellectual attention in action. This correlation between necessity and the free act of attention is a marvel. The greater the required effort of attention, the more visible this marvel is. This is much more noticeable with regard to fundamental truths concerning the quantities called irrationals, like the square root of two, than with regard to fundamental truths concerning whole numbers. To conceive the first with the same rigour as the

49 Spinoza, *Ethics* 5P23Schol.

second, to conceive them as rigorously necessary, requires a far greater effort of attention. Therefore they are far more precious.

This inherent power of intellectual attention makes it an image of the Wisdom of God. God created by the act of thinking. We, by intellectual attention,
282 are admittedly not creating, we are not producing anything, but nevertheless within our sphere we in some way give rise to reality.

This intellectual attention is at the intersection of the natural part and the supernatural part of the soul. Having conditional necessity as its object, it only gives rise to a semi-reality. We confer on things and on beings around us, as far as is in us, the fullness of reality when to intellectual attention we add that still greater attention which is acceptance, consent, and love. But the very fact that the relation that makes up the fabric of necessity hangs on the act that our attention performs makes it something that is ours and that we can love. Moreover every human being who suffers is soothed somewhat, provided his mind has some elevation in perspective, when he conceives clearly the necessary connection of cause and effect that produces his suffering.

Necessity has a part also in justice. In one sense however it is the opposite of justice. One has understood nothing as long as one does not know what the difference is, as Plato says, between the essence of the necessary and the essence of the good. Justice for man appears at first as a choice, choice of good and rejection of evil. Necessity is absence of choice, indifference. But it is the first principle of co-existence. And at bottom, supreme justice is for us acceptance of the co-existence with us of all beings and all things which do as a matter of fact exist. It is permissible to have enemies, but not to desire that they not exist. If this desire is indeed not present, then neither will one do anything to put an end to their existence, outside cases of strict obligation; one will not do them any harm. Nothing more is required if it is well understood that to omit to do good to a human being when one can and may do so, is to do him harm. If one accepts the co-existence of beings and of things with us, then one will no longer covet domination or riches, since domination and riches have no other use than to cast a veil over this co-existence, to decrease the proportion of all that is other than oneself. All crimes, all grave sins are specific forms of the refusal of this co-existence; a sufficiently close analysis would show this for each particular case.

There is an analogy between the fidelity of the right-angled triangle to the relationship that prevents it from leaving the circle in which its hypotenuse

is the diameter and that of the man who, for example, refrains from acquiring power or money at the price of fraud. The first can be regarded as a perfect model of the second. The same can be said, when mathematical 283
necessity is observed within matter, of the fidelity with which floating bodies emerge from the water precisely to the extent required by their density, no more no less. Heraclitus said, "The sun will not exceed its limits; else the Erinyes, servants of Justice, would catch it in the act."[50] There is in things an incorruptible fidelity to their place in the order of the world, a fidelity whose equivalent man can exhibit only once he has arrived at perfection, once he has become identical to his own vocation. The contemplation of the fidelity of things, whether in the visible world itself, or in mathematical or analogous relations, is a powerful means of arriving at it. The first lesson of this contemplation is not to choose, is to consent equally to the existence of all that exists. This universal consent is the same thing as detachment, and attachment, even the weakest or seemingly most legitimate, forms an obstacle to it. This is why one must never forget that light shines equally on all beings and all things. It is thus the image of the creative will of God that maintains equally all that which exists. It is to this creative will that our consent must conform.

What permits contemplating necessity and loving it is the beauty of the world. Without beauty this would not be possible. For while consent is the proper function of the supernatural part of the soul, it cannot actually operate without a certain collusion from the natural part of the soul and even from the body. The completeness of this collusion is the completeness of joy; extreme affliction by contrast makes this collusion at least for a time altogether impossible. But even those who have the infinitely precious privilege of participating in the cross of Christ could not attain this if they had not gone through joy. Christ knew the perfection of human joy before being plunged into the depths of human despair. And pure joy is nothing other than the feeling of beauty.

Beauty is a mystery; it is what is most mysterious here below. But it is a fact. All beings recognise its power, including the most uncouth or most vile, although very few possess the judgement or the ability to use it. It is invoked in the lowest debauchery. Generally speaking, all human beings

50 Heraclitus, DK 22B94; KRS 226. *Erinyes* is another name for the Furies, agents of vengeance on oath breakers.

employ words that relate to beauty to designate all that to which they attach,
284 rightly or wrongly, a value, whatever the nature of that value. One would think they consider beauty the only value.

There is here below strictly speaking but one single beauty, it is the beauty of the world. The other beauties are reflections of this one, whether faithful and pure, or deformed and defiled, or even diabolically perverted.

To be sure the world is beautiful. When we are alone in the midst of nature and open to being attentive, something draws us to love that which surrounds us, which however consists only of brute, inert, mute and deaf matter. And beauty touches us all the more intensely when necessity appears in a way more manifest, for example in the folds that gravity impresses on the mountains or on the tides of the sea, or in the movement of the stars. In pure mathematics too necessity is resplendent with beauty.

No doubt, the very essence of the feeling of beauty is the feeling that this necessity, one of whose sides is brute coercion, has as its other side obedience to God. As an effect of a providential mercy this truth is made perceptible to the carnal part of our soul and even in some way to our body.

This array of marvels is finished through the presence of divine verities, indicated symbolically, within the necessary connections that compose the universal order. Here then is the marvel of marvels, and is like the secret signature of the artist.

Mathematics is doubly wronged when regarded only as a rational and abstract speculation. It is that, but it is also the very science of nature, one completely concrete, and it is also a mysticism. The three jointly and inseparably.

When one observes the property that makes the circle the locus of the apices of right-angled triangles having the same hypotenuse, if at the same time one pictures a point describing the circle and the projection of this point onto the diameter, what is observed can be stretched quite far downwards and upwards. The connection between the movements of the two points, one circular, the other alternating, encloses the possibility for all the transformations of circular into alternating movement, and vice versa, which are the basis of our technology. It is the very essence of the process by which a knife-grinder sharpens knives.

At the same time, the circular movement, conceived not as a point, but as a whole circle rotating upon itself, is the perfect image of the eternal act that

constitutes the life of the Trinity. This movement constitutes an operation 285
without any change, one which curls back upon itself. The alternating movement of the point which goes back and forth along the diameter, enclosed by the circle, is the image of becoming here below, consisting of successive and opposing disruptions of equilibrium, the inconstant equivalent of an equilibrium both motionless and in action. This becoming is in effect the projection here below of divine life. Just as the circle confines the point moving along the diameter, so God assigns a boundary to all becomings here below. As the Bible says, he shackles the waves of the sea. The line segment that joins the point on the circle to its projection onto the diameter is, in the diagram, an intermediary between the circle and the diameter; at the same time, from the point of view of quantities, it is qua mean proportional the mediation between the two parts of the diameter that are on either side of the point. That is the image of the Word. As a rule, the circle is necessary for the construction of every mean proportional between quantities whose relationship is not a |*whole*| [rational][51] number to the second power; and the mean is always provided by a perpendicular connecting a point on the circle to the diameter. If one extends the perpendicular to the other side, one has a cross inscribed in a circle. If the terms between which a mean is sought are in the relation of one to two, it is demonstrable that no whole number can provide the solution because it would have to be both even and odd. Thus one can say that the quantity that constitutes this mean and is the measure of this line segment is both even and odd. The Pythagoreans saw the opposition between odd and even as an image of the opposition between supernatural and natural, on account of the kinship of the odd with oneness. All of this is contained in the act of a knife-grinder who moves a wheel by means of a pedal.

That is just one small example. In general, mathematics in its widest sense, that is to say as encompassing under this name all theoretical, rigorous and pure study of necessary relations, constitutes at the same time the unique knowledge of the material universe wherein we exist and the evident reflection of divine verities. No miracle, no prophecy, is comparable to the marvel of this accord. To conceive the extent of this marvel one must realise that the very perception of sensible things among even the least advanced human

51 Weil's father, when making a copy of the manuscript, corrected 'whole' to 'rational' noting the correction was due to Pierre Honnorat.

286 beings implicitly contains a large number of mathematical relations that are its precondition; that even the most primitive practical skill is always to some degree applied mathematics, at least implicitly; that the methodical employment of mathematical relations in the movements involved in labour and practical skills alone can sometimes give man this feeling of equilibrium with the forces of nature that corresponds to natural happiness; that the use of mathematical relations alone allows considering the sensible world as constituted by inert matter rather than innumerable capricious divinities. It is this selfsame mathematics that is first, before all else, a sort of mystical poem composed by God himself. So much so that one is tempted to doubt that something so great should be so recent, and to suppose that perhaps the Greeks did not invent geometry, but partly simply revealed it and partly retrieved it.

At the end of such meditations one reaches an extremely simple view of the universe. God has created, that is to say not that he has produced something outside himself, but that he has withdrawn, allowing a part of being to be other than God. This divine renunciation is answered by the renunciation of the creation, that is, its obedience. The whole universe is nothing other than a compact mass of obedience. This compact mass is dotted with luminous points. Each one of these points is the supernatural part of the soul of a rational creature who loves God and consents to obey. The remainder of the soul is taken up into the compact mass. The beings endowed with reason who do not love God are only fragments of the compact and dark mass. They too are complete obedience, but only in the manner of a stone that falls. Their soul too is matter, psychic matter, subject to a mechanism as rigorous as that of gravity. Even their belief in their own free will, the illusions of their pride, their acts of defiance, their revolts, all of these, are simply phenomena determined as strictly as the refraction of light. Considered in this way, as inert matter, the worst criminals are part of the order of the world and consequently of the beauty of the world. Everything obeys God, consequently everything is perfectly beautiful. To know this, really to know it, is to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect.

This universal love belongs only to the contemplative faculty of the soul. He who truly loves God leaves each part of the soul to its proper function. Below the faculty of supernatural contemplation lies a part of the soul which
287 is at the level of obligation, for which the contrast between good and evil

must be as strong as possible. Lower still is the animal part of the soul which should be methodically trained by an expert combination of whippings and lumps of sugar.

Among those who love God, even among those who are perfect, the natural part of the soul is always wholly subject to mechanical necessity. But the presence of supernatural love in the soul constitutes a new factor in the mechanism and transforms it.

We are like the shipwrecked clinging to planks in the sea and buffeted, wholly passive, by the movements of the waves. From high heaven God throws each one a rope. The one who grabs the rope and does not let it go despite the pain and the fear remains as much as the others subject to the surges of the waves; but now these surges combine with the tension on the line to form a different mechanical assemblage.

Thus, although the supernatural does not move down into the domain of nature, nature is nonetheless changed by the presence of the supernatural. The inherent power which is common to all those who love God and the most surprising miracles of certain saints are equally explained by this influence, which is as mysterious as beauty and of the same kind. Both are a reflection of the supernatural in nature.

When one conceives the universe as an immense mass of blind obedience dotted with points of consent, one also conceives one's own being as a small mass of blind obedience with a point of consent at the centre. Consent is supernatural love, it is the spirit of God within us. Blind obedience, this is the inertia of matter, which in our imagination is perfectly represented by the element at once resistant and fluid, that is to say by water. At the moment in which we consent to obedience, we are begotten out of water and spirit. We are from then on a being composed solely of spirit and water.

The consent to obey is mediator between blind obedience and God. The perfect consent is that of Christ. Consent in us can be only a reflection of that of Christ. Christ is mediator between God and us on one side, and between God and the universe on the other; and we, to the extent that it is granted to us to imitate Christ, we too have this extraordinary privilege of being in 288
some degree mediators between God and his own creation.

But Christ is mediation itself, harmony itself. Philolaus said, "The things that are neither of the same kind nor of the same nature nor of the same level need to be held together under lock and key by a harmony

capable of keeping them in a universal order."[52] Christ is that key which holds together the Creator and the creation. Given that knowledge is the reflection of being, Christ is thereby also the key to knowledge, "Woe betide you, you who know the law, said he; you have removed the key of knowledge."[53] That key was he himself, that the centuries before him had loved ahead of time, and that the Pharisees had denied and were going to kill.

Anguish, says Plato, is the dissolution of harmony, the separation of opposites; joy is their reunion. The crucifixion of Christ nearly did open, nearly did separate, the Father and the Son on the one hand, and the Creator and the creation on the other. The door opened halfway. The resurrection closed it again. Those who have the immense privilege of participating with their whole being in the Cross of Christ go through the door, pass to the side where the very secrets of God are found.

But more generally, any kind of anguish and above all any kind of affliction borne well leads to the other side of a door, reveals a harmony under its true aspect, the aspect turned upward, and tears away one of the veils that separates us from the beauty of the world and the beauty of God. This is what the end of the Book of Job shows. Job, at the end of his despair, which despite appearances he has borne perfectly, receives the revelation of the beauty of the world.

There is furthermore an equivalence of a kind between joy and anguish. Joy too is revelation of beauty. Everything will move forward the one who keeps his eyes always fixed on the key. It is necessary only to see it.

There are three mysteries in human life of which all human beings, even the most mediocre, have some knowledge. One is beauty. Another is the operation of the pure intelligence as applied to the contemplation of theoretical necessity in the knowledge of the world, and the embodiment of purely theoretical concepts in practical skills and labour. The last are the flashes of justice, of compassion, and of gratitude that sometimes arise in the midst of the hardness and metallic coldness of human relations. These are the three
289 supernatural mysteries constantly present right at the core of human nature. These are three openings that give access directly to the central door that is Christ. As a consequence of their presence, man has no possibility here

52 DK44B6.
53 Lk 11:52.

below for a profane or natural life that is innocent. There is only faith, implicit or explicit, or else perfidy.

One must reach the point of no longer seeing anything other than divine mediation above the skies and throughout the universe. God is mediation, and all mediation is God. God is mediation between God and God, between God and man, between man and man, between God and things, between things and things, and even between each soul and itself. One cannot pass from anything to anything without passing through God. God is the sole path. He is the way. Way was his name in ancient China.

Man cannot conceive this divine operation of mediation, he can only love it. But his intelligence conceives perfectly clearly a degraded image of it, which is relation. There is never in human thought anything other than relations. Even with perceptible objects, as soon as their perception is analysed with any rigour, it is recognised that what are so-named are simple bundles of relations which impose themselves on thought through the intermediary of the senses. It is the same for feelings, ideas, and for all the psychological content of human consciousness.

We do not have anything in us and around us except relations. In the semi-darkness in which we are immersed, everything for us is relation, just as within the light of reality everything in itself is divine mediation. Relation is divine mediation glimpsed in our darkness.

This identity is what John expressed in giving Christ the name relation, *logos*, and what the Pythagoreans expressed in saying, "All is number."[54]

When one knows this, one knows that one lives in divine mediation not like a fish in the sea, but like a drop of water in the sea. In us, outside us, here below, in the Kingdom of God, nowhere is there anything else. And mediation is exactly the same thing as Love.

The supreme mediation is the mediation of the Holy Spirit uniting across an infinite distance the divine Father to the Son equally divine, but emptied of his divinity and nailed to a point in space and time. This infinite distance is made of the totality of space and time. The portion of space around us, delimited by the expanse of the horizon, the portion of time between our birth and our death, that we live second by second, which is the fabric of our 290
life, is a fragment of that infinite distance entirely permeated by divine love.

54 Weil may have in mind the passage by Philolaus, DK44B4, on manuscript page 247 of this essay.

The being and the life of each one of us is a small segment of this line whose endpoints are two Persons and one single God, this line along which Love is circulating is also the same God. We are nothing other than a point through which God's divine Love for himself is passing. Under no circumstances are we anything else. But if we know it and if we consent to it, then all our being, all that in us which seems to be ourselves, becomes to us infinitely more alien, more indifferent and more distant than this uninterrupted passage of God's Love.

N.B.[55] It may seem surprising to see in these pages the Incarnation being presented not as destined for men, but on the contrary as that in relation to which humanity has its destination. There is no incompatibility between these two inverse relations. One speaks mainly of the first for an obvious reason, which is that men are much more interested in themselves than in God. The second is stated in a clear and definite way in St. Paul's statement, "God wanted to give his Son many brothers."[56] It is perhaps even more true than the other one, since in everything God is first relative to man. It makes better sense perhaps of the mysteries of human life. Used in this way, it would lead to new views on our destiny, and in particular on the relations between suffering and sin. The effects of affliction on the soul of the innocent are not truly intelligible unless one thinks that we have been created as brothers to Christ crucified. The absolute domination throughout all the universe of a necessity mechanical, mathematical, and absolutely deaf and blind, is not intelligible unless one thinks that the whole universe in the totality of space and time has been created as the Cross of Christ. That, probably, is the profound meaning of Christ's reply on the subject of the man born blind and of the cause of his affliction.[57]

The principal effect of affliction is to force the soul to cry out, "why," as Christ himself did, and to repeat this cry without interruption save when exhaustion interrupts it. There is no answer. When one finds a comforting answer, firstly one made it up for oneself; secondly the fact that one has the power to make it up shows that the suffering, however intense it might be,
291 has not reached the level peculiar to affliction, just as water does not boil

55 This paragraph was added in the margin by Weil.

56 This is the same allusion, now as a quotation, that Weil made to Rom 8:29 on manuscript page 265.

57 Jn 9:2–3.

at 99 degrees. Were the word "Why" to express the search for a cause, the answer would be quick to appear. But it expresses the search for a purpose. This whole universe is devoid of purposiveness. The soul which, because it is torn apart by affliction, cries out continually for this purposiveness, touches this void. If it does not give up loving, it will one day come to hear not an answer to the question it cries out, for there is none, but the silence itself as something infinitely more full of meaning than any answer, as God's speech itself. It knows then that the absence of God here below is the same thing as the secret presence here below of the God who is in heaven. But to hear the divine silence one must have been compelled to look in vain for a purposiveness here below, and only two things have the power to do so: affliction, or pure joy that is made of the feeling of beauty. Beauty has this power that, without containing any specific purposiveness, gives the insistent feeling of the presence of a purposiveness. Affliction, and utmost and pure joy are the only two paths, and they are equivalent, but affliction is the path of Christ.

The cry of Christ and the silence of the Father together form the supreme harmony, the harmony, of which all music is a mere imitation, which those of our harmonies that are at once most heartrending and tender resemble from infinitely far away. The entire universe, including our own existences, which are small fragments of it, is only the vibration of this supreme harmony.

In every comparison of this kind, one that seems to dissolve the reality of the universe in favour of God, there is a danger of pantheistic error. But the analysis of the perception of a cuboid box provides with respect to this a perfect metaphor, prepared for us by God. There is no point of view from which the box has the appearance of a cube; only a few surfaces are ever seen, the angles do not seem straight, the sides do not seem equal. No one has ever seen, no one will ever see, a cube. No one has ever touched nor will ever touch a cube either, for analogous reasons. If one goes around the box, one gives rise to an indefinite variety of apparent forms. The cubic form is not any one of them. It is other to every one of them, external to every one of them, transcendent to their domain. At the same time it constitutes their unity. It also constitutes their truth.

We know this so well, with our whole soul, that by a sort of transferring of the feeling of reality, every time we look at the box, we believe we are 292

really and directly seeing a cube. And even this wording is much too weak. We have the certainty of contact, direct and real, between our thought and the cube-shaped matter.

God, by arranging our bodily senses for our use in this way, has given us a perfect model of the love that we owe Him. He has enclosed a revelation within our very sensibility.

Just as when looking at the box from whatever vantage point we no longer see any acute or obtuse angles, or uneven lines, but only a cube, so too when experiencing whatever event in the world and whatever frame of mind in ourselves, we need hardly take note of them, but only see in all this an order of the world that is fixed and forever the same, one that is not a mathematical form, but a Person; and this Person is God.

Just as a child learns the use of his senses, learns sensory awareness, and the perception of things surrounding him, just as later on he acquires the analogous mechanisms of development that are linked to reading or to the new sensibility that accompanies the handling of tools, so too the love of God implies an apprenticeship. A child knows at first that each letter corresponds to a sound. Later on, in casting his eyes over a piece of paper, the sound of a word enters his mind directly through the eyes. Similarly we begin at first by knowing abstractly that God must be loved in all things. Only later does the beloved presence of God enter each second into the centre of our soul through all the occurrences, large and small, that compose the fabric of each day. The passage to this state is an operation analogous to the one by which a child learns to read, by which an apprentice learns a trade, but analogous above all to the one by which a very young child learns the perception of sensible things.

To help very young children, one gives them regularly-shaped objects that are easy to handle, explore and recognise, like balls or cubes. In the same way, God makes the apprenticeship of men easier by giving them, in social life, religious practices and sacraments, and in the inanimate universe, beauty.

All human life, the most common, the most natural, is made like this once it is examined apart from the fabric of mysteries utterly impenetrable to the intelligence, which are the images of supernatural mysteries and which one can only account for by this resemblance.

293 Human thought and the universe constitute in this way the books of revelation par excellence, if the attention enlightened by love and faith knows how to decipher them. Reading them constitutes a proof, indeed the only certain

proof. After having read the *Iliad* in Greek, no one would dream of wondering whether the teacher who taught him the Greek alphabet had misled him.

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

During her 1942 sojourn in Casablanca en route to New York, Weil wrote this long essay at breakneck speed to send to Father Perrin. In it, she attempts to outline the Pythagorean ideas taken up by Plato—especially evident in the *Timaeus*—and their similarity with fundamental Christian ideas found in the Gospels. The Greek principle of cosmic harmony is in Weil's hands transposed to a conception of the harmony in the triune God as the model for cosmic order.

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Part 3

BEYOND THE SKY

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PREFACE TO PART 3
Beyond the sky

In her writings, Simone Weil gives a speculative cosmogony based sometimes on pre-Socratic and Platonic cosmology and sometimes on ideas from the Christian tradition and scripture. It has to be speculative because Weil allows that an answer to the question of why existence should have come to be must remain a mystery. It is beyond our comprehension, not least because it presumes a mode of being as unlike our own as it is possible to be. The possible comings into existence here below, directed as they are by the order of time, life and death is the nature of our mode of being. By contrast the origin, the basis or the active principle behind existence itself must transcend time itself and thus be also beyond change itself; that is, it is unchanging and outside time and space.

Nonetheless, while acknowledging, often arguing, that it is beyond comprehension, Weil believes that this underlying reality is one to which one can become indirectly related by means of mediation. This can be attained through contact with aspects of mediation—the intermediaries—that appear within existence here below in the forms of beauty, order, necessity, justice and love, among others. This mediating contact intimates, however imperfectly, the nature of the underlying reality which, exceeding our comprehension, resists being put into language. Nonetheless, Weil does not think language is useless here, rather she sees it as functioning indirectly as a kind of aid or support in directing one's mind, attention, and consent to what she names as *beyond the sky*. The halting and faltering attempt to write about what

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is beyond the sky, using religious language as an aid, is the subject of the texts in Part 3 of this volume.

There is a vital point of contact between the texts collected in Parts 1 and 2 and the texts of Part 3. The texts of Part 2 obviously reflect the centrality of mediation as the basis for any contact or connection between what is here below and what is beyond the sky. The connection to Part 1, with its emphasis on the lives people live, with their practices and institutions, and with the possibilities for making their lives better is insistently present in the texts of Part 3 even though Weil's focus is on a cosmology that is remote and intrinsically incomprehensible. Weil's starting point is always people: the people whose lives are enriched by sacraments in religious practices; who suffer the distinctive wretchedness of affliction; whose lives are formed by their relationship to beauty; or people as neighbours and friends, in communities and as fellow citizens. Despite the cosmic frame of reference, Weil's purpose is practical, namely finding the right response to those who are hurt, afflicted or the victims of injustice. Very often, by showing how love for another at its best can be an image of divine love, she effectively bridges or connects the cosmic to an immediate individual. The texts of Part 3 are thus not a theological digression, as they might appear, but they are instead a natural extension of the interests and concerns that had always moved Weil in her labours of thought. In her hands, with her motivations, religious language is used in an attempt to ameliorate those qualities of the human situation that are the most vexed, enduring and profound.

19

THEORY OF SACRAMENTS

Human nature is so arranged that a desire of the soul has no reality in the soul until it has passed through the flesh by means of actions, movements, and stances which naturally correspond to it. It is there only as a phantom. It does not act upon the soul. 341

Upon this arrangement is founded the possibility of a certain control of the self by means of the will, through the natural connection between the will and the muscles.

But even if the exercise of the will can, to however limited an extent, prevent the soul from falling into evil, it cannot in itself increase the proportion of good relative to evil within the soul. | *The good that* |

If a man does not have enough money in his wallet for what he wants, he has to go and get some more at a bank. It is not at home that he will find it, since he hasn't got it.

The good that we do not have within ourselves, we cannot, whatever effort of the will we might make, acquire for ourselves. We can only receive it | *from outside* |.

We receive it unfailingly on one single condition. The condition is desire. But not the desire of a partial good.

Only desire directed straight at pure, perfect, total, absolute good, can put a little more good into the soul than was there before. When a soul is in this state of desire, its progress is proportional to the intensity of desire and time.

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But only real desires work. The desire for absolute good, likewise, is effective as far and only as far as it is real.

But with the movements and stances of the body able to have objects only here below, how then could this desire have a passage into the state of reality through the flesh?

342 It is impossible.

Wherever it is certain that a thing indispensable to salvation is impossible, it is certain that a supernatural possibility really exists.

In all that concerns absolute good and the contact with it, the argument from perfection (sometimes falsely called the ontological argument) is not only valid, but is the only valid one. It follows directly from the very concept of good. It is to the good what necessity is to geometric proof.

In order that desire for absolute good pass through the flesh, an object here below must be the absolute good in relation to the flesh, as a sign and by convention.[1]

Being the absolute good in relation to the flesh does not mean it is a good of the flesh. In relation to the flesh it is the absolute good of the spirit.

A convention relating to |*human*| things here below can be concluded and endorsed between men, or between a man and himself.

A convention relating to absolute good can only be endorsed by God.

(This idea of divine endorsement is, in the Canon of the Mass, what immediately precedes consecration.)

A divine endorsement necessarily implies a direct revelation from God and it might even necessarily imply the Incarnation.

The only things that can be signs of God are those that have been established as such by God.

By a convention established by God between God and men, a piece of bread signifies the person of Christ. Hence, since a convention endorsed by

1 The word 'convention' in French and English share the same Latin root and have very similar meanings whose senses are that of an agreement, covenant, an accord, as well as common, customary behaviour. Weil's use of it here recalls a debate at least as old as Plato about the extent to which language can be conventional. Are the meanings of signs or words determined by *an* agreement, by being *in* agreement, or because of an essential relationship between the sign and what it signifies? Sometimes words fit their meanings, as a key fits a lock: by design or by accident. Thus, while on the one hand, Weil uses 'convention' (in the sense of 'mere convention') to indicate that there is something accidental about what comes to be a sacrament; on the other hand, she uses it (in the sense of an 'accord') to indicate that a sacrament would not work to reach God if the accord by which it does so were not endorsed by God.

God is infinitely more real than matter, its reality as bread, while still remaining, becomes mere appearance relative to the infinitely more real reality that constitutes its signification.

In conventions established between men, the signifier of a thing has less reality than the matter which composes it. In a convention established by God, it is the opposite. But the divine signifier surpasses matter in its reality to an infinitely greater degree than matter surpasses the human signifier.

If one believes that contact with the piece of bread is a contact with God, then, in the contact with the bread, the desire for contact with God, which was only an impulse, passes the test of reality.

By that very fact and because, in this domain, desiring is the sole condi- 343
tion for receiving, there is a real contact between the soul and God.

In matters here below, belief is a producer of illusion. It is only |*with things*| in relation to divine things and at the moment when a soul has its desire and its attention turned toward God that belief has the inherent power to produce the real, and this as the result of desire. The belief productive of reality is known as faith.

Grace is at once that which is to us the most external and the most internal. Good only comes to us from outside, but only the good to which we consent enters us. Consent is only real at the moment when the flesh makes it so by a bodily movement.

We cannot transform ourselves, we can only be transformed, but we can only be transformed if we really want to be so. A bit of matter does not have the inherent power to transform us. But if we believe that it has the power through the will of God and for this reason we take it into us, then we |*make*| really perform an act of welcome towards the desired transformation, as a result of which it comes down to the soul from the height of heaven. In this way, the bit of matter had the inherent power one supposed.

A sacrament is an arrangement that corresponds in a flawless, perfect, way to the dual character of the operation of grace, suffered and consented at the same time, and to the relation of human thought to flesh.

There is a double condition on this inherent power of belief within the supernatural mechanism of the sacrament.

It is necessary that the object of desire not be anything other than the unique, pure, perfect, total, and absolute good, which is for us inconceivable. Many people apply the word God like a label on a conception fabricated by their soul or supplied by their environment. There are many conceptions of this kind which more or less closely resemble the true God, but which

the soul can think without in fact having its attention oriented outside this world. In this case thought, though seemingly occupied with God, continues to dwell in this world and belief, following the law of this world, is a fabricator of illusion, not of truth.

This state is not however one without hope, since the name of God and that of Christ have in themselves such inherent power that they can with time bring the soul out of it and draw it into the truth.

The second condition is that the belief in a certain identity of the piece of
344 bread and God should have entered the whole being to the point of permeating not the intelligence, which can have no part in this, but all the rest of the soul, imagination, sensibility, almost the flesh itself.

When these two conditions are met and the approaching contact with the bread is on the point of submitting the desire to the test of reality, something really takes place within the soul.

So long as a desire has no contact with the real, there is no conflict in the soul over it. For example, if a man sincerely desires to risk death as a soldier for his country, and is unable to take even one step toward making this happen, if for example he is half-paralysed, then his desire will not be fought in his soul by the fear of death.

If a man has the opportunity of either going into battle or avoiding it, and he decides to go, and takes steps to do so, and succeeds, and comes under fire, and is sent on an extremely perilous mission, and is killed; then it is almost certain that at some moment in this march of duty the fear of death will arise in his soul and will be fought. That moment may occur at any point at all in this march depending on his temperament and the nature of his imagination. It is only at the approach of this moment that the desire to face death has become real.

It is the same for the desire for contact with God. So long as it is not yet real, it leaves the soul at rest.

But when the conditions for a true sacrament are met and the sacrament is about to take place, the soul divides.

|*The soul*| One part of the soul, which may at that moment be imperceptible to consciousness, aspires to the sacrament; it is the share of truth in the soul; for "he who does the truth comes to the light."[2]

2 Jn 3:21.

But the whole lower part of the soul is repelled by the sacrament, hates it and fears it much more than the recoiling flesh of an animal fleeing the death which comes to take it. For "whoever does low things hates the light."[3]

Thus begins a separation of the wheat from the chaff.

Christ said, "I have come not to bring peace, but the sword."[4] And St. Paul, "The word of God is alive and active and sharper by far than any two-edged sword and penetrates as far as to separate soul from spirit, bone from marrow, and distinguishes the sentiments and thoughts of the heart."[5]

Communion is thus a passage through fire which burns and destroys a 345
portion of the impurities of the soul. The subsequent communion destroys another portion of it. The quantity of evil contained in a human soul is finite; this divine fire is inexhaustible. Thus, at the conclusion of this process, in spite of one's worst deficiencies, unless there is perfidy and deliberate refusal of good or an accidental occurrence of death before its completion, the passage into the state of perfection cannot fail.

The more real the desire for God and hence the contact with God through the sacrament, the more violent the upheaval of the lower part of the soul; upheaval comparable to the recoil of living flesh on the point of being put into fire: it has, depending on the case, the colour principally of repulsion or hate or fear.

When the soul is in a state where approaching the sacrament is more painful than walking towards death, it is right at the threshold beyond which martyrdom is easy.

In its desperate effort to survive and escape destruction by fire, the lower part of the soul devises arguments with feverish activity. It borrows them from any arsenal whatsoever, including theology and all the warnings about the dangers of sacraments for the unworthy.[6]

Provided these thoughts are absolutely unheeded by the soul in which they arise, this internal tumult |*upheaval*| is infinitely felicitous.

3 Jn 3:20.
4 Mt 10:34, Lk 12:51.
5 Heb 4:12–13.
6 Likely allusion to 1 Cor 11:27.

The more violent the inner movement of recoil, revolt and fear, the more certain it is that the sacrament will destroy much evil within the soul and move it much nearer to perfection.

"The mustard seed is the smallest of seeds."[7]

The imperceptible atom of pure good lodged in the soul by a movement of real desire towards God is this seed. If it is not torn out by a consented betrayal, there shall in time inevitably come forth from it branches upon which the birds of the sky will settle.

Christ said (Mark 4:26), "The kingdom of God is as if a man casts seed upon the earth, then sleeps and watches night and day, and the seed sprouts and stretches up without his knowing how. The earth bears fruit automatically:[8] first the grass, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. And when it has given the corn, he sends forth the scythe, because the harvest is here."

When the soul has once crossed a threshold through a real contact with
346 pure good—of which the inner tumult before the sacrament is perhaps a sure sign—nothing more is asked of it except attending motionless.

Attending motionless does not mean the absence of external activity. External activity, so long as it is strictly imposed by human obligations or by specific commandments of God, is a part of this motionlessness of the soul; falling short or going too far likewise disturb the stance of attending motionless.

An activity matching exactly what is commanded is a condition for the soul's attending, just as in a child who is studying the motionlessness of the body is a condition for attention.

But, just as physical motionlessness is something other than attention and is by itself ineffectual, it is the same for the acts required of the soul that has reached this state.

Just as a truly attentive man need not force himself into motionlessness so as to produce attention in himself, on the contrary as soon as his thought is applied to a problem, he naturally and automatically suspends the movements that would disturb it, so the prescribed actions flow automatically from a soul in a state of attending motionless.

7 Mt 13:32 and Mk 4:31.

8 Weil is translating from the Greek word *automati*. She no doubt recalled the Greek and supplied a nearly homophonic French word that is perhaps ill-judged; she should probably have used 'of itself' but she may be preparing to make a related point five paragraphs later.

So long as perfection is far off, these actions are frequently mixed with sorrow, pain, tiredness, an appearance of internal struggle, and often serious failures; yet, so long as there have been no consented betrayals in the soul, there is in their performance something irresistible.

Man cannot exempt himself from the required actions, but it is not insofar as he acts that he is liable to being loved by God.

"Which of you, having a slave who labours or looks after the cattle, says to him when he returns from the fields, 'Come quickly and seat yourself to eat'? Does he not say to him, 'Make my meal, gird yourself, serve me food and drink, and after that you will eat and drink yourself'? And will he have any gratitude to the slave because he carried out his orders? Likewise you say, when you have done all that is commanded of you, 'We are worthless slaves; what was required of us, we have done.' (Luke 17:7)"

The slave who receives love, gratitude and even service from his master is not the one who labours and cooks. That is someone else.

Not that there is a choice between two ways of serving God. These two slaves represent the same soul under two different relationships or, again, two inseparable parts of the same soul. 347

The slave who will be loved is the one who is standing upright and motionless near the door, in a state of watchfulness, waiting, attention, and desire, to open it as soon as he hears knocking.

Neither tiredness, nor hunger, nor appeals, friendly invitations, injuries, blows or taunts from his pals, nor the rumours which might circulate around him according to which his master is dead, or else annoyed with him and resolved to hurt him, nothing will disturb in the least his attentive motionlessness.

"And you, be like the men who await their master on his return from a wedding, so that when he arrives and knocks, they can immediately open the door to him. Blessed are those slaves whom their master finds watchful on arrival. Verily, I say to you, him, he will gird himself, and them, he will make them recline at his table, and he will come before them to serve them."[9]

The state of attending so rewarded is ordinarily called patience.

But the Greek word ὑπομονή is infinitely more beautiful and charged with a different meaning.

9 Lk 12:36–37.

It denotes a man who attends without moving, despite all the blows by which others try to make him move.

καρποφοροῦσιν ἐν ὑπομονῇ

They will bring forth fruit in the state of attending.

Oeuvres complètes V:1

This was probably one of the last pieces Weil wrote before her hospitalisation in London in April 1943. She wrote it for Maurice Schumann, a Parisian contemporary, and recent Catholic convert, with whom Weil was friendly in London. She returns here to make sense of the mystery of how a material sacrament can effect a connection to God, an issue she had first addressed in "Forms of the Implicit Love of God" in April 1942.

20

FORMS OF THE IMPLICIT LOVE OF GOD

The commandment: "Love God" implies by its imperative form that it concerns, not only the consent that the soul can grant or refuse when God comes in person to take the hand of his future spouse, but also a love prior to this visit. For it concerns a permanent obligation. 285

The prior love cannot have God as its object, since God is not present and has never yet been so. It therefore has another object. It is destined however to become love of God. One can call it indirect or implicit love of God.

This is true even when the object of this love bears the name of God. For one can then say either that this name is applied improperly, or that its use is legitimate only on account of the development which is to come.

The implicit love of God can have only three immediate objects, the only three objects here below where God is really, albeit secretly, present. These objects are religious ceremonies, the beauty of the world, and one's neighbour. That makes three loves. 286

To these three loves one should perhaps add friendship; strictly speaking, it is distinct from charity towards one's neighbour.

These indirect loves have an inherent power that is exactly and strictly equivalent. Depending on the circumstances, temperament, and vocation, one or the other enters the soul first; one or the other predominates during

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the period of preparation. It may not necessarily be the same one throughout this period.

It is likely that in most cases, the period of preparation only comes to its end, the soul is only ready to receive the visit of its Master, when it bears within it all these indirect loves to a high degree.

Together these loves constitute the love of God in the form appropriate to the preparatory period, in a form that is cloaked.

They do not disappear when the love of God proper arises in the soul; they become infinitely stronger, and all of it together makes but one single love.

But the cloaked form of the love necessarily comes first, and often for a very long time it alone reigns in the soul; for many, perhaps until their death. This cloaked love can reach very high levels of purity and strength.

Each of the forms that this love can assume has, at the moment when it touches the soul, the inherent power of a sacrament.

LOVE OF ONE'S NEIGHBOUR

Christ has shown clearly enough that this is so for the love of one's neighbour. He said that he would one day thank his benefactors by saying to them, "I was hungry and you gave me to eat."[1] Who could be Christ's benefactor, if it is not Christ himself? How can a man give Christ to eat if he is not, for a
287 moment at least, raised to that condition St. Paul spoke of, where he himself no longer lives in himself, where Christ alone lives in him?[2]

The passage from the Gospels concerns only the presence of Christ within the afflicted. Yet it seems that the spiritual merit of the one who receives is in no way what is at issue. It must then be admitted that it is the benefactor himself, as the bearer of Christ, who brings Christ into the afflicted, starving man with the bread he gives him. The other may or may not consent to this presence, exactly like one who takes communion. If the giving is well-given and well-received, the passing of a piece of bread from one man to another is something like a true communion.

Christ's benefactors are not called by him loving or charitable. They are called the just. The Gospels make no distinction between love of one's neighbour and justice. In the eyes of the Greeks too, respect for Zeus suppliant was

1 Mt 25:35.
2 Gal 2:20.

the first of the duties of justice. We have invented the distinction between justice and charity. It is easy to understand why. Our idea of justice exempts the one who possesses from giving. If he gives nonetheless, he believes he can be pleased with himself. He thinks he has done a good deed. As for him who receives, depending on how he understands this idea, it either exempts him from any gratitude, or else it compels him to give abject thanks.

Only the absolute identification of justice and love makes possible both compassion and gratitude on the one hand, and on the other respect for the dignity of affliction in those afflicted, on their own part and on the part of others.

One must believe that no benevolence can go farther than justice, on pain of doing wrong under a false appearance of benevolence. But one must thank the just for being just, because justice is something so very beautiful, just as we thank God on account of his great glory. Any other gratitude is servile and even animal.

The only difference between one who witnesses an act of justice and one who receives material benefit from it is that in this circumstance the beauty of justice is for the first only a spectacle, and for the second it is a point of connection and even something like nourishment. Thus, the feeling which in the first is mere admiration should in the second be taken to a much higher level by the fire of gratitude.

To be without gratitude when one has been treated with justice in circum- 288
stances where injustice was easily possible is to deprive oneself of the supernatural, sacramental, inherent power contained in every pure act of justice.

Nothing allows better understanding this inherent power[3] than the doctrine of natural justice, such as one finds it set out with an incomparable probity of mind in a few marvellous lines by Thucydides.

The Athenians, at war against Sparta, wanted to force the inhabitants of the small island of Melos, allied to Sparta from time immemorial and so far remaining neutral, to join with them. Vainly did the Melians, facing the Athenian ultimatum, invoke justice and implore pity for the antiquity of

3 Weil uses 'vertu' which is being translated as 'inherent power' here and in the preceding sentence. She is making use of the fact that 'vertu' also means virtue, which is in sharp contrast to the natural justice she is about to discuss. 'Vertu' on the next three manuscript pages is translated as 'virtue'. See "Translators' Introduction".

their city. As they would not give in, the Athenians razed the city, put the men to death, and sold all the women and all the children as slaves.

The speech in question is placed by Thucydides in the mouth of these Athenians. They begin by saying that they will not try to prove that their ultimatum is just.

"Let us rather address that which is possible . . . You know this as do we; the way the human mind is constituted, what is just is examined only if there is equal necessity on both sides. But if there is a strong and a weak, that which is possible is imposed by the first and accepted by the second."[4]

The Melians said that in the event of battle they would have the gods on their side on account of the justice of their cause. The Athenians responded that they saw no reason to suppose so.

"We have regarding the gods the belief, regarding men the certainty, that always, by a necessity of nature, each commands everywhere where he has the power to do so. We did not lay down this law, we are not the first to make use of it; we found it laid down already, we keep it as if it will last forever; and that is why we make use of it. We well know that you too, like all the others, once you had reached the same degree of strength, you would do the same."[5]

This lucidity of intelligence in the conception of injustice is the light immediately below that of charity. It is the clarity that persists for a time wherever charity has existed, but has then faded away. Below it is the darkness where the strong sincerely believe that their cause is more just than that of the weak. That was the case with the Romans and the Hebrews.

Possibility and necessity are, in the above speech, terms opposed to jus-
289 tice. Possible is anything that the strong can impose on the weak. It is only reasonable to examine how far this possibility goes. If one supposes it to be known, then it is certain that the strong will realise his will to the extreme limit of possibility. That is a mechanical necessity. Otherwise it would be as though he willed and did not will at the same time. There is a necessity here for the strong just as for the weak.

When two human beings have to deal with each other and when neither has the power to impose anything on the other, they must come to an understanding. One then considers justice, for justice alone has the power to make

4 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, V.89.

5 Thucydides, V.105.

two wills coincide. Justice is the image of that Love which in God unites the Father and the Son, which is the common thought of those thinking separately. But when there is a strong and a weak, there is no need to unite two wills. There is but one will, that of the strong. The weak obeys. Everything happens as it does when a man makes use of matter. There are not two wills to make coincide. Man wills, and matter undergoes. The weak is like a thing. There is no difference between throwing a stone to drive away a troublesome dog and telling a slave, "Chase that dog away."

For someone inferior, beyond a certain level of inequality in the unequal relationships of force between men, there is a passage into the condition of matter and the loss of personhood. The ancients said, "A man loses half his soul the day he becomes a slave."

The balanced scales, image of the equal relation of forces, has been from time immemorial, and especially in Egypt, the symbol of justice. It may have been a religious object before being employed in commerce. Its use in commerce is the image of this mutual consent, the very essence of the justice which should be the rule for trade. The definition of justice as consisting in mutual consent, which was found in the legislation of Sparta, was probably of Aegeo-Cretan origin.

The supernatural virtue of justice, if one is the superior in the unequal relationship of forces, consists in acting exactly as if there were equality. Exactly in every regard, including the smallest details of tone and bearing, for one detail can be enough to cast the inferior back into the condition of matter which in this case is naturally his own, just as the least shock freezes water that remained liquid below zero degrees.

This virtue, for the inferior treated in such a way, consists in his not believing that there truly is equality of forces, but in appreciating that the generosity of the other is the sole cause of this treatment. This is known as appreciation.[6] For the inferior treated in a different way, the supernatural 290
virtue of justice consists in understanding that the treatment he undergoes, on the one hand differs from justice, but on the other conforms to necessity

6 Weil is making use here of a wordplay made possible by the internal relation between 'reconnaitre' and 'reconnaissance', the latter of which can mean gratitude. To capture this, 'appreciate' and 'appreciation' are used in the translation. This is relevant to the discussion on the following manuscript page, 290.

and the mechanism of human nature. He must go on without submission and without rebellion.

He who treats as equals those whom the relationship of forces places far beneath him truly gifts them with the quality of human beings of which fate deprived them. As far as is possible for a creature, he reproduces with respect to them the original generosity of the Creator.

This virtue is the quintessential Christian virtue. It is also the virtue in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* which is expressed in words as sublime as even those of the Gospels, "I have made no one weep. I have never made my voice over loud.[7] I have never caused fear in anyone. I have never made myself deaf to just and true words."

The appreciation in the one afflicted, when it is pure, is merely a participation in this very same virtue, for only he who is capable of it can appreciate it. The others experience its effects without appreciating it.

Such a virtue is identical to the real, the actual, faith in the true God. Thucydides' Athenians thought that divine beings, like man in the state of nature, command to the extreme limit of the possible.

The true God is God conceived as all powerful, but as not commanding everywhere where He has the power to do so; for He is found only in the heavens, or else here below in secret.

Those Athenians who massacred the Melians no longer had any idea of such a God.

What proves their error is first that, contrary to their assertion, it happens, though extremely rarely, that out of pure generosity a man refrains from commanding where he has the power to do so. What is possible for man is possible for God.

One can contest the examples. But it is certain that if in this or that example it could be proved to be solely a matter of pure generosity, then that generosity would be widely admired. Anything that man is capable of admiring is possible for God.

7 The editors of the *Oeuvres complètes* assert that Weil translated these words from the English in J. H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), 258. If so, Weil's translation from the English is not quite right, and so where she has given the French *hautaine* (haughty) the translation uses Breasted's original 'over loud' which is probably closer to the meaning intended in the Egyptian text.

The world before us is an even more certain proof. Pure good is nowhere to be found in it. Either God is not all powerful, or else He is not absolutely good, or else He does not command everywhere where he has the power to do so.

Thus the existence of evil here below, far from being a proof against the 291
reality of God, is that which reveals it to us in its truth.

Creation on the part of God is an act not of self-expansion, but of withdrawal, of renunciation. God and all the creatures together are less than God alone. God has accepted this diminution. He has emptied from himself a part of being. He was already emptied of his divinity in this act; that is why John says that the Lamb had been slaughtered since the formation of the world. God has permitted things to exist other than Him and worth infinitely less than Him. He has negated himself by the creative act, just as Christ has called upon us to negate ourselves. God has negated himself on our behalf so as to give us the possibility of negating ourselves for Him. This response, this echo, which is ours to refuse, is the only possible vindication for the madness of love in the creative act.

The religions that have formed an idea of this renunciation, this voluntary distance, this voluntary effacement of God, his apparent absence and his secret presence here below, these religions are the true religion, the translation into different languages of the great Revelation. The religions that present the divine as commanding everywhere where it has the power to do so are false. Even if they are monotheistic, they are idolatrous.

The man who, being reduced by affliction to the state of an inert and passive thing, returns at least for a time to the human state through the generosity of others, this man, if he is able to welcome and feel the true essence of this generosity, receives in that instant a soul born exclusively out of charity. He is begotten from on high from water and spirit. (The Gospel term ἄνωθεν means from on high more often than anew.) Treating one's afflicted neighbour with love is something like baptising him.

The man from whom this act of generosity comes can only act as he does if he is transported into the other by thought. He too, at that moment, is composed only of water and spirit.

Generosity and compassion are inseparable and both have their model in God, namely the Creation and the Passion.

Christ has taught us that supernatural love of one's neighbour is the exchange of compassion and gratitude that happens like a flash between

two beings one of whom is endowed with, and the other deprived of, the human person. One of the two is only a bit of naked, inert and bleeding flesh, by the side of a ditch, nameless, about whom no one knows a thing. Those who pass alongside this thing barely see it, and a few minutes later
292 do not even know they saw it. Only one stops and pays attention to it. The actions that follow are merely the automatic effect of this moment of attention. This attention is creative. But in the moment when it is taking place it is renunciation. At least if it is pure. The man accepts a diminution by gathering himself for an expenditure of energy that will not extend his power, that will only bring into existence a being other than him, independent of him. Even more, to want the existence of the other is to transport oneself into him, by sympathy, and in consequence to partake in the condition of inert matter in which he is found.

This process is against nature to the same degree for a man who has not known affliction and is ignorant of it, and for a man who has known or foreseen affliction and who is filled with a horror of it.

It is not surprising that a man who has bread gives a piece of it to a starving man. What is surprising is that he should be able to do so in a manner different from that by which one purchases an object. Almsgiving, when it is not supernatural, is similar to a purchase transaction. It purchases the afflicted.

Whatever else a man might want, in crime as in the highest virtue, in the slightest worries as in grand plans, the essence of his will consists always in this, that he first of all wants to will freely.[8] To want the existence of this faculty of free consent in another man who has been deprived of it by affliction is to transport oneself into the other, it is to consent, oneself, to affliction, that is to say to one's own destruction. It is to negate oneself. In negating oneself, one becomes able, after God, to affirm another by a creative affirmation. One gives oneself as ransom for the other. It is a redemptive act.

The sympathy of the weak for the strong is natural, for the weak, by transporting himself into the other, acquires an imaginary strength. The sympathy of the strong for the weak, being the process in reverse, is against nature.

8 The French verb 'vouloir' can be used to express willing as well as wanting, and the noun 'le vouloir' is a synonym for the will. Willing and wanting have an internal relation of some philosophical complexity. Weil is using 'vouloir' throughout this paragraph and the translation varies between 'willing' and 'wanting' to convey this dual nuance in the French.

This is why the sympathy of the weak for the strong is pure only if its sole object is the other's sympathy for him, in the case where the other is truly generous. That is supernatural gratitude, which consists in being happy to be the object of supernatural compassion. It leaves pride absolutely intact. The preservation of true pride in affliction is also something supernatural. Pure gratitude, like pure compassion, is essentially consent to affliction. The one afflicted and his benefactor, between whom the difference in fortune places an infinite distance, are one within this consent. There is friendship between 293
them in the Pythagorean sense, miraculous harmony and equality.

At the same time both recognise with their whole soul that it is better not to command everywhere where one has the power to do so. This thought, if it occupies the whole soul and rules the imagination, which is the source of actions, constitutes true faith. For it casts good out of this world, where all the sources of power are; it recognises good as the paradigm of the secret point which lies at the centre of the human person and the active principle of renunciation.

Even in art and science, if the production of the second-rate, whether brilliant or mediocre, is extension of self, the production of everything first-rate, creation, is renunciation of self. This truth is not perceived, because fame indiscriminately intermixes and covers with its sparkle first-rate productions and the most brilliant of the second-rate, indeed often to the advantage of the latter.

Charity towards one's neighbour, being constituted by creative attention, is analogous to genius.

Creative attention consists in really paying attention to that which does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh inert by the side of the road. The Samaritan who stops and looks does nonetheless pay attention to this absent humanity, and the actions that follow testify that it is a matter of real attention.

Faith, says St. Paul, is the sight of invisible things.[9] In that moment of attention, faith is present just as much as love.

Likewise a man who is entirely at the whim of others does not exist. A slave does not exist, neither in the eyes of the master nor in his own eyes. The black slaves of America, when they accidentally injured themselves in the foot or hand, used to say, "It doesn't matter, it is the master's foot, the

9 Apparent allusion to Heb 11:1.

master's hand." He who is entirely without the possessions in which social recognition is crystallised, whatever they might be, does not exist. A Spanish folk song says in words of marvellous truth, "If someone wants to make himself invisible, there is no way more sure than to become poor." Love sees the invisible.

God has thought that which was not, and by the act of thinking it has enacted it.[10] At any instant, we exist only due to the fact of God consenting to think our existence, even though in reality we do not exist. At least this is how we picture the Creation, humanly and in consequence falsely, but this
294 imagery contains truth. God alone has this power, of really thinking that which is not. Only God present in us can really think the human quality in the afflicted, truly look at them with a look other than that accorded to objects, truly listen to their voice as one listens to speech. These afflicted then realise that they have a voice; otherwise they would have no chance of becoming aware of it.

Difficult as it is to truly listen to someone afflicted, it is no less difficult for him to know that he is listened to only through compassion.

The love of one's neighbour is the love which comes down from God to man. It is prior to that love which goes up from man to God. God longs to come down to the afflicted. As soon as a soul is disposed to consent, even were it the last, the most miserable, and the most deformed, God hastens into it so that through it he can look at and listen to the afflicted. Only with time does the soul become aware of this presence. But even if no name were found for it, everywhere where the afflicted are loved on their own account, God is present.

God is not present, even if he is invoked, anywhere the afflicted are simply an occasion for doing good, even if they are loved under this title. For then they are in their natural role, in their role as matter, as things. They are loved impersonally. And in their inert, anonymous state, they must be brought a personal love.

This is why expressions like loving one's neighbour in God, for God, are misleading and equivocal. A man does not have much to spare from his power of attention if he is simply to be able to look at this bit of inert,

10 Weil's original "par le fait de le penser l'a fait être" trades on the wordplay between *fait* as 'fact' and as 'made'. The translation attempts to reproduce this in English. Weil's wordplay emphasises the identity between the fact of thinking it and making it be so.

unclothed flesh by the side of the road. That is not the moment for turning one's thought towards God. As there are moments when one must think of God while forgetting all creatures without exception, so there are moments when while looking at creatures one must not think explicitly of the Creator. In these moments God's presence in us is conditional on a secret so deep that it would be a secret even to us. There are moments where thinking of God separates us from Him. Modesty is the condition of marital union.

In true love, it is not we who love the afflicted in God, it is God in us who loves the afflicted. When we are in affliction, it is God in us who loves those who want good for us. Compassion and gratitude come down from God, and when they are exchanged in a look, God is present at the point where 295
one look meets the other. The afflicted and the other love each other starting with God, through God, but not for the love of God; they love each other for their love of each other. Such a thing is impossible. That is why it only takes place through God.

He who gives bread to an afflicted, starving man for the love of God will not be thanked by Christ. He has already had his reward in that thought itself. Christ thanks those who knew not to whom they were giving food.

Moreover, giving is only one of two possible forms of the love for the afflicted. The ability to act is always being able to benefit and to hurt. In a very unequal relationship of strength, the superior can be just with regard to the inferior either by benefitting him with justice, or by hurting him with justice. In the first case it is almsgiving, in the second it is punishment.

Just punishment, like just almsgiving, cloaks the real presence of God and constitutes something like a sacrament. This too is clearly indicated in the Gospels. It is expressed by the phrase, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone."[11] Christ alone is without sin.

Christ spared the adulterous woman. The task of punishment was not fitting for an earthly existence that was to end on the cross. But he did not prescribe the abolition of penal justice. He allowed stoning to continue. Wherever it is done justly, it is therefore he who casts the first stone. And just as he dwells in the afflicted, starving man whom a just man feeds, so he dwells also in the afflicted convict whom a just man punishes. He did not say it, but he indicated it well enough by dying as a convict under common law. He is the divine role model for felons. Just as the young workers

11 Jn 8:7.

formed within the JOC[12] become intoxicated by the idea that Christ was one of them, so the felons could legitimately sample the same intoxication. It would only be necessary to tell them as much, just as one tells the workers. In one sense Christ is closer to them than to the martyrs.

The stone that kills and the piece of bread that nourishes have exactly the same inherent power, if Christ is present at the start and at the finish. The giving of life and the giving of death are equivalent.

According to Hindu tradition, King Rama, incarnation of the second Person of the Trinity, to his great regret, in order to avoid a scandal among his people had to put to death a low-caste man, who contrary to law engaged
296 in the practices of religious asceticism. He went to find the man himself and killed him with a stroke of his sword. Immediately afterwards, the soul of the dead man appeared to him and fell at his feet, thanking him for the measure of glory that had been conferred upon him by the contact with that blessed sword. Thus, the execution, although completely unjust in one sense, but legal and performed by the very hand of God, had had all the inherent power of a sacrament.

The legal character of a punishment has no true significance if it does not confer on it something of the religious, if it does not make it into the analogue of a sacrament; and consequently, all penal offices, from that of judge all the way to executioner and prison guard, should participate in some way in the priesthood.

Justice is defined in punishment in the same way as in almsgiving. It consists in paying attention to someone afflicted as a being and not as a thing, in desiring the preservation in him of the faculty of free consent.

Men believe they feel contempt for crime but in reality they feel contempt for the weakness of affliction. A being in whom both of these are combined allows them to give themselves over to contempt for affliction under the pretext of feeling contempt for crime. He is thus the object of the greatest contempt. Contempt is the opposite of attention. The only exception is if it is a crime which for some reason has prestige, as is often the case with murder on account of the momentary power it involves, or which does not sharply provoke the idea of guilt in those who are judging. Theft is the crime most lacking in prestige and that causes the most indignation, because property

12 *Jeunesse Ouvrieres Chretiens* (Young Christian Workers).

is the most general and most powerful attachment. This is even reflected in the penal code.

Nothing is lower than a human being wrapped in a true or false appearance of guilt who finds himself entirely at the mercy of a few men who will with a few words decide his fate. These men do not pay attention to him. Furthermore, from the moment a man falls into the hands of the criminal justice system right up to the moment he leaves—and those known as felons, and indeed prostitutes, hardly ever leave it until they die—he is never an object of attention. Everything is worked out down to the smallest detail, down to the inflections of the voice, to make him in the eyes of everyone and in his own eyes into something vile, an object to be cast aside. The brutality and glibness, the terms of contempt and the jokes, the way of speaking, the way of listening and of not listening, everything is equally effective.

There is no malice intended here. It is the automatic effect of a profes- 297
sional life which has as its object crime seen under the form of affliction, that is to say in the form where the awfulness of defilement is laid bare. Such contact, being continuous, necessarily contaminates, and the form of that contamination is contempt. It is this contempt that spills over onto every person accused. The criminal justice system is like a conveyer belt that will spill onto every accused the whole of the defilement contained within all the milieux where affliction-crime has its home. There is in the very contact with the criminal justice system a kind of awfulness directly proportional to innocence, to the part of the soul still intact. Those who are completely rotten are not damaged by it and do not suffer from it.

It cannot be otherwise unless there is something between the criminal justice system and crime that purifies defilements. This something can only be God. Only infinite purity is not contaminated by contact with evil. All finite purity, through this prolonged contact, becomes itself defilement. No matter how the penal code is reformed, punishment cannot be humane unless it passes through Christ.

The severity of the sentences is not what is most important. In the present conditions, a convict, although guilty and subject to a comparatively lenient sentence relative to his offence, can most often be legitimately considered to have been the victim of a cruel injustice. What is important is that the sentence be legitimate, meaning that it proceed directly from the law; that the law be recognised as having a divine character, not by its content but because it is law; that the whole organisation of criminal justice have as its goal to

secure from magistrates and their aids, for the accused, the attention and the respect owed by every man to whomever he finds in his power, and to secure from the accused the consent for the sentence imposed, a consent of which the innocent Christ has given us the perfect model.

The death penalty for a minor offence, imposed in this way, would be less horrible than a six-month prison sentence today. Nothing is more dreadful than the so frequent sight of an accused not having anything in the situation in which he finds himself to fall back on besides his words, yet incapable of using words because of his social background and lack of learning, worn down by guilt, affliction and fear, stammering before judges who are not listening and who interrupt him by an ostentatious show of refined language.

298 As long as there is affliction in social life, as long as almsgiving, whether legal or private, and punishment are inevitable, the separation between civil institutions and religious life will be a crime. The secular conception considered in isolation is completely wrong. It only has some legitimacy as a reaction against a totalitarian religion. In that context it must be admitted that it is in part legitimate.

To be able to be, as it should, present everywhere, religion should not only not be totalitarian, but should limit itself strictly to the plane of supernatural love which alone is appropriate for it. If it did so, it would penetrate everywhere. The Bible says, "Wisdom penetrates everywhere because of its perfect purity."[13]

Through Christ's absence, begging in the broadest sense and the criminal act are perhaps the most dreadful things on earth, two things almost infernal. They have the very colour of hell. One could add prostitution to them, which is to true marriage what almsgiving and punishment without charity are to just almsgiving and punishment.

Man has received the ability to do good and evil not only to the body but to the soul of his fellow, to the whole of the soul of those in whom God is not present, to the whole of the part of the soul not inhabited by God in the others. If a man, whether inhabited by God, by the power of evil, or simply by the mechanism of the body, gives or punishes, what he bears within him enters the soul of the other through the bread or the steel of the sword. The substance of the bread and the steel of the sword are blank, empty of good

13 *The Wisdom of Solomon*, 7:24 in the Septuagint or Apocrypha.

and of evil, indifferently capable of transferring one or the other. The one whom affliction forces to receive the bread, to suffer the blow, has his soul exposed naked and defenceless to both good and evil.

There is only one way never to receive anything but good. That is to know, not abstractly but with one's whole soul, that men who are not animated by pure charity are cogs in the order of the world in the same way as inert matter. Hence everything comes directly from God, either through the love of a man, or through the inertia of tangible or psychic matter; through spirit or through water. Everything that increases the vital energy in us is like the bread for which Christ gives thanks to the just; all the blows, the wounds and the mutilations are like a stone thrown at us by the very hand of Christ. Bread and stone come from Christ and, penetrating into our inner being, make Christ enter us. Bread and stone are love. We must eat the bread and 299
offer ourselves to the stone in such a way that it sinks into our flesh as far as possible. If we have armour capable of protecting us against the stones thrown by Christ, we must remove it and cast it aside.

LOVE OF THE ORDER OF THE WORLD

The love of the order of the world, of the beauty of the world, is thus the complement of the love of one's neighbour.

It proceeds from the same renunciation, the image of God's creative renunciation. God made this universe exist by consenting not to command there, despite having the power to do so, but to leave ruling in his place, on one side the mechanical necessity attached to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul, and on the other side the autonomy essential to thinking persons.

By the love of one's neighbour, we imitate the divine love that created us, as well as all our fellows. By the love of the order of the world we imitate the divine love that has created this universe of which we are a part.

Man does not have to renounce commanding matter and souls, since he does not possess the power to do so. But God has conferred on him an imaginary image of this power, an imaginary divinity, so that he too, despite being a creature, might empty himself of his divinity.

Just as God, being outside the universe, is at the same time really at its centre, so too each man has an imaginary position at the centre of the world. The illusion of perspective situates him at the centre of space; a similar

illusion distorts the awareness of time in him; and still another, similar illusion arranges the whole hierarchy of values around him. This illusion applies even to the sense of existence, because of the intimate connection, in us, between the sense of value and the sense of being; being appears to us increasingly thin the farther it is from us.

We relegate the spatial form of this illusion to its level, the level of deceptive imagination. We are obliged to do so; otherwise we would not perceive a single object, we could not orient ourselves enough even to be able to take
300 a single step in a conscious fashion. God thus provides us the model of the operation that should transform our whole soul. Just as we teach every child to lower, to restrain, this illusion within his intuition of space, so must we do the same in relation to the sense of time, of value, and of being. Otherwise we are incapable, in every respect other than that of space, of discerning a single object, of taking a single step. We are in unreality, in a dream. Renouncing our imaginary, central position, renouncing it not only by the intelligence, but also within the imaginative part of the soul, is to awaken to the real, to the eternal, to see the true light, to hear the true silence. A transformation then takes place at the very root of sensibility in the immediate way sensible impressions and psychological impressions are received. A transformation analogous to this occurs when in the evening, on a road, at a place we had thought we saw a crouching man, we suddenly discern a tree; or when, having thought we heard a whisper, we discern a rustling of leaves. One sees the same colours, hears the same sounds, but not in the same way.

To empty oneself of one's false divinity, to negate oneself, to renounce being in one's imagination the centre of the world, to discern all the points in the world as being centres with the same standing and the true centre as being outside the world, is to consent to the reign of mechanical necessity within matter, and of free choice at the centre of every soul. This consent is love. The facet of this love turned towards thinking persons is charity towards one's neighbour; the facet turned towards matter is love of the order of the world or, what is the same thing, love of the beauty of the world.

In antiquity, love of the beauty of the world held a very important place in their thoughts and enveloped the whole of life with a marvellous poetry. This was so among all peoples, in China, in India, in Greece. Greek Stoicism, which was something wondrous and to which early Christianity was infinitely close, especially the thought of John, was almost exclusively love of the beauty of the world. As for Israel, certain parts of the Old Testament,

in Psalms, in the Book of Job, in Isaiah and in the wisdom literature, contain an incomparable expression of the beauty of the world.

The example of St. Francis shows what place the beauty of the world can hold in a Christian way of thinking. Not only is his poem perfect poetry, but his whole life was perfect poetry in action. For example his choice of sites for 301
solitary retreats or for the foundation of convents was in itself the most beautiful poetry in deed. The roaming, the poverty, was poetry with him; he made himself naked to be in immediate contact with the beauty of the world.

In St. John of the Cross one also finds some beautiful verses on the beauty of the world. But in general, making suitable allowances for unknown or little-known treasures buried perhaps among the forgotten things of the Middle Ages, it can be said that the beauty of the world is almost absent from the Christian tradition. This is strange. The cause of it is difficult to understand. It is a terrible omission. How could Christianity have the right to call itself catholic, if the universe itself is absent from it?

It is true that there is little mention of the beauty of the world in the Gospels. But in so short a text which, as John says, is very far from comprising all the teachings of Christ, the disciples probably judged it pointless to remark on a feeling so pervasive everywhere.

Nonetheless it is mentioned twice. Once Christ bade us to contemplate and to imitate the lilies and the birds for their indifference to the future, for their docility towards fate; another time, to contemplate and to imitate the undifferentiated distribution of rain and sunlight.

The Renaissance thought to renew the spiritual links to antiquity while bypassing Christianity, but it took little more from antiquity than the secondary products of its inspiration, its art, science and curiosity about human affairs; it scarcely touched its central inspiration. It did not recover the contact with the beauty of the world.

In the 11th and 12th centuries there had been the beginning of a Renaissance which would have been the true one if it had been able to bear fruit; it began to germinate particularly in the Languedoc. Some verses of the troubadours on Spring make one think that in this case the Christian inspiration and the beauty of the world would not perhaps have been separated. Furthermore, the Occitanian spirit left its mark on Italy and was not perhaps foreign to the Franciscan inspiration. But, either by coincidence, or more probably by relation of cause and effect, these sprouts did not survive the Albigensian war anywhere, except in a vestigial state.

Today, one might think that the white race has almost lost the sensitivity
302 to the beauty of the world, and that it has taken on the task of making it disappear on all the continents to which it has carried its arms, its commerce and its religion. As Christ said to the Pharisees, "Woe unto you! You have removed the key of knowledge; you do not enter and you do not let the others enter."[14]

And yet in our age, in the countries of the white race, the beauty of the world is almost the only path through which one can let God in. For we are still much further away from the other two. Real love and respect for religious practices is rare even among those who are conscientious about them, and they are almost never found among the rest. Most do not even conceive their possibility. As for the supernatural use of affliction, compassion and gratitude are not only something rare, but have become today almost unintelligible to almost everyone. The very idea of them has almost disappeared; the very meaning of the words has become base.

Whereas the feeling of beauty, although mutilated, deformed and defiled, inexorably remains in man's heart as a powerful motive. It is present in all the concerns of secular life. If it were made authentic and pure, it would all at once carry all of secular life to God's feet, it would make possible the total incarnation of faith.

Besides, generally speaking, the beauty of the world is the most common, the most simple and the most natural path.

Just as God hastens into every soul as soon as it is ajar in order to love and serve the afflicted through it, so too does He hasten into it in order to love and admire through it the perceptible beauty of his creation.

But the opposite is even more true. The natural inclination of the soul to love beauty is the most frequent trap God makes use of to open the soul to inspiration from on high.

This is the trap by which Kore was caught.[15] The sweet smell of the narcissus made the whole of heaven smile up above, and the whole earth, and all the swelling of the sea. Barely had the poor maiden reached out her hand than she was caught in the trap. She had fallen into the hands of the living

14 Lk 11:52.

15 Kore, along with Proserpine, is a name for Demeter's daughter, Persephone, who was abducted by Hades when he used the scent of the narcissus to tempt her into a trap that brought her to his kingdom, where he made her his wife and the queen of the underworld.

God. When she came out, she had eaten the pomegranate seed which bound her forever. She was no longer a virgin; she was the spouse of God.

The beauty of the world is the entrance to the labyrinth. The unwary one who, having entered, takes a few steps, is after a while unable to find the entrance again. Exhausted, without anything to eat or drink, in darkness, separated from his family, from all that he loves, from all that he knows, he 303
walks without knowing anything, without hope, unable even to tell whether he is really getting anywhere or walking in circles. But this hardship is nothing compared to the danger that threatens him. For if he does not lose heart, if he carries on walking, then it is quite certain he will eventually get to the centre of the labyrinth. And there, God is waiting to eat him. Later on, he will come out again, but changed, now different, having been eaten and absorbed by God. He will then stand beside the entrance so as to gently push into it those who come near.

The beauty of the world is not an attribute of matter itself. It is a relationship of the world to our sensibility, that sensibility which results from the structure of our body and our soul. Voltaire's Micromégas or some thinking marine microorganism would have no access to the beauty on which we nourish ourselves in the universe.[16] Were such beings to exist, one must have faith that the world would also be beautiful for them; but it would be another beauty. In any event one must have faith that the universe is beautiful on every scale; and more generally that it has the fullness of beauty relative to the bodily and psychic structure of each thinking being that does in fact exist and of all thinking beings that are possible. It is indeed this concurrence of an infinity of perfect beauties which constitutes the transcendent character of the beauty of the world. Nonetheless what we experience of this beauty has been destined for our human sensibility.

The beauty of the world is divine Wisdom's cooperation in creation. "Zeus fashioned all things," says an Orphic verse, "and Bacchus finished it."[17] Finishing it, that is the creation of beauty. God created the universe, and his Son, our first-born brother, created its beauty for us. The beauty of the world is Christ's tender smile for us throughout matter. He is really present within

16 The scale of the eponymous main character of Voltaire's novel, *Micromégas*, is immense, c. 40 km tall. Weil also imagines thinking *infusoria*, a genus of unicellular marine creatures. The gigantic Micromégas and the single-celled, tiny infusorians live on scales very different from ours.

17 Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's* Timaeus, Book 1.

universal beauty. Love of this beauty proceeds from God descended into our soul, and it goes toward God present within the universe. It is also something like a sacrament.

This is so only for universal beauty. But, except for God, only the universe as a whole can with complete propriety of language be called beautiful. Everything that is within the universe and less than the universe can be called beautiful only by extending this word beyond its strict meaning, to things which partake indirectly of beauty, which are imitations of it.

All these secondary beauties are of infinite value as openings onto uni-
304 versal beauty. But if one stops at them, they are instead veils; they are then corrupting. All of them contain this temptation more or less, but to varying degrees.

There are also a number of seductive factors which are completely alien to beauty, but on account of which, through lack of discernment, things in which they are found are called beautiful. For they attract love by fraud, and all men call beautiful anything that they love. All men, even the most ignorant, even the most vile, know that beauty alone has a right to our love. The truly greatest of them know it too. No man is below or above beauty. The words that express beauty come to the lips of everyone as soon as they wish to praise what they love. They are only more or less able to discern it.

Beauty is the sole purposiveness here below. As Kant said so well, it is a purposiveness that does not contain any purpose. A beautiful thing does not contain any good, other than itself, in its totality, such as it appears to us. We go towards it without knowing what to ask of it. It offers us its own existence. We do not desire anything else, we have got it, and yet still we desire. We do not quite know what. We would like to go behind the beauty, but it is only surface. It is like a mirror that reflects back on us our own desire for the good. It is a sphinx, an enigma, a painfully frustrating mystery. We would like to feed upon it, but it is only an object for looking at, it only appears at certain distance. The great sorrow of human life is that looking and eating should be two different activities. Only on the other side of the sky, in the land inhabited by God, is it one and the same activity. Already children, when they look at a cake for a long time and then take it to eat almost regretfully, unable to stop themselves, experience this pain. Perhaps vices, depravities and crimes are at root nearly always or even always attempts to eat beauty, to eat that which must only be looked at. It began with Eve. If humanity was lost by her eating a fruit, the opposite attitude, looking at a

fruit without eating it, should be what saves it. "Two winged companions," says an Upanishad, "two birds, are on a tree branch. The first eats the fruits, the other looks at them."[18] These two birds are the two parts of our soul.

It is because beauty does not contain any purpose that it constitutes here below the sole purposiveness. For here below there are no purposes at all. All 305
those things we take for purposes are means. That is an evident truth. Money is a means to buy, power is a means to command. That is how it is, more or less obviously, with the things we call goods.

Only beauty is not a means to something else. It alone is good in itself, but without our locating any good in it. It seems itself to be a promise and not a good. But it gives only itself, it never gives anything else.

Nevertheless, as it is the sole purposiveness, it is present in all human pursuits. While all of them are going after only means, since everything that exists here below is only a means, beauty gives them a lustre that colours them with purposiveness. Otherwise there could not be desire, nor in consequence energy in their pursuit.

For a miser like Harpagon, all the beauty of the world is bound up in gold. And indeed gold, being a pure and brilliant material, does have something beautiful about it. The disappearance of gold as currency seems also to have made this type of miserliness disappear. Today, those who amass without spending are looking for power.

Most of those who pursue wealth conjoin it with the idea of luxury. Luxury is the purposiveness of wealth. And luxury is beauty itself for a whole species of men. It constitutes the surroundings in which they are alone able to vaguely feel that the universe is beautiful; just as Saint Francis, in order to feel that the universe is beautiful, needed to be a vagabond and beggar. Both means would be equally legitimate if in both cases the beauty of the world was experienced in a manner just as direct, pure, and complete; but fortunately God has willed that it not be so. Poverty has a privilege. Here then is a providential arrangement in the absence of which the love of the beauty of the world would easily come into conflict with the love of one's neighbour. Nevertheless the dread of poverty—and all decrease in wealth, or even its non-accrual, can be felt as poverty—is essentially the dread of ugliness. The soul prevented by circumstances from feeling anything of the beauty of the

18 This passage appears in several of the Upanishads, including *Mundaka Upanishad*, III, 1.

world, even confusedly, even through falsehood, is invaded to its core by a kind of dread.

The love of power comes down to the desire to establish an order among the men and the things around one, on a large or small scale, and that order is desirable as an effect of the feeling of beauty. In this case as in that
306 of luxury, it is a matter of imparting to a particular finite setting, though one which one often continually desires to expand, an arrangement that gives the impression of universal beauty. The discontentment, the desire for expanding, is precisely because one desires contact with universal beauty, whereas the setting that one is organising is not the universe. This setting is not the universe and it conceals it. The universe all around is then like a theatre backdrop.

Valéry, in the poem titled *Sémiramis*, makes one feel the connection between the exercise of tyranny and the love of beauty very well. Louis XIV, apart from war which is an instrument for expanding power, was interested only in festivities and architecture. War itself moreover, especially as it used to be, affects the sensitivity to beauty in an acute and poignant way.

Art is an attempt to transfer into a finite quantity of matter fashioned by man an image of the infinite beauty of the whole universe. If the attempt is successful, this portion of matter should not conceal the universe, but on the contrary reveal the reality all around.

Works of art that are not just and pure reflections of the beauty of the world, direct openings made onto it, are not beautiful properly speaking; they are not first-rate; their authors may have a lot of talent, but not authentic genius. This is the case for many of the most celebrated and most vaunted works of art. Every true artist has had a real, direct, and immediate contact with the beauty of the world, a contact which is something like a sacrament. God has inspired every first-rate work of art, even were the subject a thousandfold profane; he has not inspired any of the rest. On the contrary, among the rest, the lustre of beauty coating some of them could well be a diabolical lustre.

The object of science is the study and theoretical reconstruction of the order of the world. The order of the world relative to the mental, psychic and bodily structure of man; contrary to the naïve illusions of some scientists, neither the usage of telescopes and microscopes, nor the use of the most singular algebraic formulae, nor even contempt for the principle of non-contradiction permits escaping the limits of this structure. This is in any case

not desirable. Science's object is the presence in the universe of the Wisdom to whom we are brothers, the presence of Christ throughout the matter which constitutes the world.

We ourselves reconstruct the order of the world in an image, starting from limited, denumerable, rigorously defined data. Between these abstract and 307
hence for us manageable terms, we ourselves make connections by devising relationships. We can thus contemplate in an image, an image whose very existence hangs upon the act of our attention, the necessity which is the very substance of the universe, but which as such only manifests itself to us by its blows.

One does not contemplate without some love. The contemplation of this image of the order of the world constitutes a certain contact with the beauty of the world. The beauty of the world is the order of the world when loved.

Physical labour constitutes a specific contact with the beauty of the world and even, in the best moments, a contact so complete that no equivalent to it can be found anywhere else. The artist, the scientist, the thinker, the contemplative, if they are really to admire the universe, have to pierce that thin layer of unreality that veils it and makes of it for almost all men, at almost every moment in their life, a dream or a theatre backdrop. They have to, but most often cannot. The one whose limbs are worn out by the effort of the day's labour, that is to say a day in which he has been subject to matter, carries the reality of the universe in his flesh like a thorn. The difficulty for him is to look and to love; if he succeeds, he loves the real.

That is the immense privilege that God has reserved for his poor. But they almost never know it. No one tells them. Exhaustion, nagging worries about money and the lack of true education prevent them from realising it. A small change in their situation would suffice to open for them access to a treasure. It is heartrending to see how easy it would be in many cases for men to provide a treasure for their fellows, and how they let centuries pass without taking the trouble to do so.

In the time when there was a civilisation based on tradition whose scraps we collect today as museum pieces under the name of folklore, the people undoubtedly had access to this treasure. Mythology too, which is closely related to folklore, testifies to this, if one deciphers the poetry in it.

Carnal love in all its forms, from the highest, such as true marriage or Platonic love, to the lowest, all the way to debauchery, has as its object the beauty of the world. The love that is addressed to the spectacle of the skies,

the plains, the sea, the mountains, to the silence of nature made perceptible
308 through its thousand soft noises, the breathing of the winds, the warmth of the sun, this love that every human being senses at least vaguely at some point, is an incomplete, painful love, because it is addressed to things incapable of responding, to matter. Men desire to shift this same love to a being who is like them, capable of responding to love, of saying yes, of offering itself. The feeling of beauty sometimes attached to the countenance of a human being makes this transfer possible at least in an illusory way. But it is the beauty of the world, the universal beauty, towards which this desire is directed.

This kind of transfer is what all the literature surrounding love expresses, from the oldest, most used metaphors and similes of poetry right through to Proust's subtle analyses.

The desire to love the beauty of the world in a human being is essentially the desire for the Incarnation. It is mistakenly believed to be something else. The Incarnation alone can satisfy it. Thus it is quite wrong that mystics are sometimes reproached for using the language of lovers. It is they who are its legitimate owners. The others are entitled only to borrow it.

If carnal love on all levels moves to a greater or lesser extent towards beauty—and the exceptions are perhaps only apparent—that is because beauty in a human being turns them for the imagination into something like an equivalent of the order of the world.

That is why sins in this domain are grave. They constitute an offence against God by the very fact that the soul is unconsciously in the middle of searching for God. For that matter, they all come down to only one, which consists in more or less wanting to dispense with consent. To want to dispense with it altogether is among all human crimes by far the most terrible. What could be more horrible than not respecting the consent of a being in whom one seeks, although without knowing it, an equivalent of God?

It is still a crime, though less grave, to content oneself with a consent born from a low or specious region of the soul. Whether or not there is a carnal union, the exchange of love is illegitimate if on either side consent does not proceed from that central point of the soul where the yes can only be eternal. The obligation to marry, nowadays regarded so often as a mere social convention, is inscribed in the very nature of human thought through the
309 affinity between carnal love and beauty. Everything that has some relation to

beauty should be withdrawn from the flow of time. Beauty is eternity here below.

It is not surprising that man in temptation should so often have the feeling of an absolute that is infinitely greater than him, that cannot be resisted. The absolute is indeed there. But one is mistaken in believing that it lies in pleasure.

The mistake is the effect of that transfer in imagination that is the principal mechanism of human thought. The slave of whom Job speaks, who in death will cease to hear the voice of his master, believes that this voice hurts him. That is all too true. The voice hurts him all too much. Yet he is mistaken. The voice by itself is not painful. If he were not a slave, it would cause him no distress. But because he is a slave, the pain and the brutality of the whip's lashes enter with the voice through his hearing to the depths of his soul. He cannot block it. Affliction has bound together this connection.

Similarly the man who believes himself to be ruled by pleasure is in reality ruled by the absolute he has lodged in it. This absolute is to pleasure as the whip's lashes are to the voice of the master; but the connection here is not the effect of affliction, it is the effect of an initial crime, a crime of idolatry. Saint Paul stressed the kinship between vice and idolatry.

He who has lodged the absolute in pleasure cannot but be ruled by it. Man does not struggle against the absolute. He who has been able to lodge the absolute outside pleasure possesses the perfection of temperance.

Different kinds of vices, the use of narcotics in the literal or metaphorical sense of the word, all of these constitute the pursuit of a state in which the beauty of the world should be sense-perceptible. The mistake consists precisely in the pursuit of a special state. False mysticism is also a form of this error. If the mistake is embedded deeply enough in the soul, the man cannot but succumb to it.

In a general way all the tastes of men, from the most guilty, to the most innocent, from the most common to the most peculiar, have a connection to a combination of circumstances, to a setting where it seems to them they have access to the beauty of the world. The preference for this or that combination of circumstances is due to temperament, to things in their past, to causes most often impossible to know.

There is but one case, though frequent, where the attraction of the pleasure of the senses is not that of the contact with beauty; this is when, to the contrary, it provides a refuge against it.

310 The soul seeks contact only with the beauty of the world or, on a still higher level, with God; but at the same time it flees it. When the soul flees something, it always flees either the horror of ugliness, or the contact with that which is truly pure. For everything mediocre flees the light; and in all souls, except those that are close to perfection, there is a large part that is mediocre. This part is seized with panic every time a little pure beauty, or pure good, appears; it hides behind the flesh, it uses it like a veil. Just as a bellicose people really need, in order to succeed in their conquering endeavours, to cover up their aggression with some pretext or other, the quality of the pretext being moreover completely irrelevant, so too the mediocre part of the soul needs a slight pretext to flee the light. The attraction of pleasure, the fear of pain, furnish this pretext. Here too, it is not pleasure, it is the absolute that rules the soul, but now as an object of repulsion and not as an object of attraction. Also very often in the pursuit of carnal pleasure, these two movements, the movement of running towards beauty and the movement of fleeing far from it, are mixed into an indiscernible tangle.

Either way, in human activities, whatever they may be, the concern for the beauty of the world, perceived in images more or less deformed or defiled, is never absent. Consequently there is no area in human life that could be nature's domain. The supernatural is everywhere present in secret; in a thousand different forms, grace and mortal sin are everywhere.

In between God and these incomplete, unconscious, sometimes criminal pursuits of beauty, the only mediation is the beauty of the world. Christianity will not become incarnate until it has added from Stoic thought, the filial devotion to the city of the world and to the homeland here below which is the universe. The day when, as a result of a misunderstanding very difficult to fathom today, Christianity became detached from Stoicism, it condemned itself to an existence that is abstract and detached.

Even the highest achievements in the pursuit of beauty, for example in art or science, are not really beautiful. The only real beauty, the only beauty which would be the real presence of God, is the beauty of the universe. Nothing smaller than the universe is beautiful.

The universe is beautiful as a perfect work of art would be if there could
311 be one that deserved that name. Thus it contains nothing that could constitute a purpose or a good. It contains no purposiveness outside of the beauty of the universe itself. Therein is the essential truth to know concerning this

universe, that it is absolutely void of purposiveness. No teleological relationship[19] applies to it, other than through mendacity or mistake.

In a poem, if someone asks why this word is in that place, and if there is an answer, then either the poem is not of the first rank, or else the reader has understood nothing. If one can legitimately say that some word is where it is so as to express some idea, or for a grammatical reason, or for the rhyme, or for an alliteration, or to fill out the verse, or for a certain colouration, or even for several reasons of this kind at once, then there was the pursuit of an effect in the composition of the poem, there was not a true inspiration. For a truly beautiful poem, the only answer is that the word is there because it was fitting that it be there. The proof of this fittingness is that it is there, and that the poem is beautiful. The poem is beautiful, which is to say, the reader does not wish it to be different.

It is thus that art imitates the beauty of the world. The fittingness of things, of beings, of events, consists only in that they exist and that we must not wish that they do not exist or that they should have been different. Such a wish is an impiety with regard to our universal homeland, an infidelity to the Stoic love of the universe. We are constituted in such a way that this love is in fact possible; and it is this possibility that is known as the beauty of the world.

Beaumarchais' question, "Why these things and not others?" never has an answer because the universe is void of purposiveness.[20] The absence of purposiveness is the reign of necessity. Things have causes and not purposes. Those who believe they discern the particular designs of Providence are like teachers who at the expense of a beautiful poem indulge in what they call the explication of the text.

The equivalent in art to this reign of necessity is the resistance of matter and arbitrary rules. Rhyming imposes on the poet a direction in the choice of words with absolutely no relation to the flow of ideas. Rhyme has in

19 "Teleological relationship" translates the French "rapport de finalité". If it were translated literally using 'purposiveness' for 'finalité' it would yield "relationship of purposiveness". However, the French phrase is a philosophical term of art—comparable to the English translation given in the text—meaning the relationship toward an end or *telos*.

20 Pierre Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, Act V, Scene 3.

poetry a role perhaps analogous to that of affliction in life. Affliction forces one to feel the absence of purposiveness with one's whole soul.

If the orientation of the soul is love, then the more one contemplates necessity, the more one clasps its hardness and metallic cold to oneself, even
312 to one's flesh, the nearer one comes to the beauty of the world. That is what Job experiences. It is because he was so honest in his suffering, because he did not allow himself any thought liable to alter the truth of it, that God came down to him to reveal to him the beauty of the world.

It is because the absence of purposiveness, the absence of intention, is the essence of the beauty of the world that Christ directed us to behold how the rain and the light of the sun come down without differentiation upon the just and the wicked. This recalls the ultimate cry of Prometheus, "Heaven through which revolves the light common to all."[21] Christ commands us to imitate this beauty. Plato in the *Timaeus* also counsels us to make ourselves by way of contemplation similar to the beauty of the world, similar to the harmony of circular movements that makes the days and the nights, the months, seasons, and years give way to each other and then return. Within these circular movements too, within their combining, the absence of intention and purposiveness is manifest; and the pure beauty is resplendent in it.

It is because it can be loved by us, it is because it is beautiful, that the universe is a homeland. It is our only homeland here below. This thought is the essence of the wisdom of the Stoics. We have a celestial homeland. Yet in one sense it is too difficult to love, because we have no knowledge of it; mostly, it is, in one sense, too easy to love, because we can imagine it as we like. We risk loving a fiction under that title. If the love of that fiction is strong enough, it makes all virtue easy, but also of little value. Let us love the homeland here below. It is real; it will resist love. It is this that God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult and yet possible to love it.

We feel here below like foreigners, uprooted, in exile. The same as Ulysses, whom sailors had carried away in his sleep, who awoke in an unknown land, and yearned for Ithaca with a yearning that rent his soul. All of a sudden Athena opened his eyes, and he realised he was in Ithaca. In the same way, every man who indefatigably yearns for his homeland, who is not distracted

21 Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1091–1092.

from his yearning either by Calypso or the Sirens, suddenly realises one day that he is in his homeland.

The imitation of the beauty of the world, our answer to the absence of purposiveness, of intention, and of differentiation, is the absence of intention in us, it is the renunciation of our own will. To be perfectly obedient is to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect.

Among men, a slave does not make himself like his master by obeying him. On the contrary, the more submissive he is, the greater the distance between him and the one who commands. 313

It is otherwise between man and God. A rational creature becomes, as much as it is within him to be so, the perfect image of the Almighty if he is absolutely obedient.

That which in man is the very image of God is something which in us is attached to the fact of being a person, but which is not this fact itself. It is the capacity to renounce the person. It is obedience.

Every time a man rises to a level of excellence that by participation makes him into a divine being, there appears in him something impersonal, anonymous. His voice is enveloped in silence. This is manifest in great works of art and thought, in the great deeds of the saints and in their words.

It is therefore true in a sense that God must be conceived as impersonal, in the sense that He is the divine model of a person who overcomes himself by renouncing himself. To conceive Him as an almighty person, or else, under the name Christ, as a human person, is to exclude oneself from the true love of God. This is why it is necessary to love the perfection of the heavenly Father in the uniform distribution of the sun's light. The divine, absolute model of this renunciation which in us is obedience, that is the creative and ordering principle of the universe, that is the fullness of being.

It is because the renunciation of being a person is what makes man the reflection of God that it is so dreadful to reduce men to the state of inert matter by precipitating them into affliction. Along with the quality of being a human person, one is taking away from them the possibility of renouncing it, except for those who are already sufficiently prepared. Just as God has created our autonomy so that we should have the possibility of renouncing it by love, for the same reason we must want the preservation of autonomy in our fellows. He who is perfectly obedient holds the faculty of free choice in men as infinitely precious.

Similarly there is no contradiction between love of the beauty of the world and compassion. This love does not preclude one from suffering for oneself

when one is afflicted. Neither does it preclude suffering because others are afflicted. It is on another plane than suffering.

The love of the beauty of the world, while being universal, brings with it,
314 as a love that is secondary and subordinate to it, the love of all the truly precious things that ill fortune can destroy. The truly precious things are those that constitute the rungs towards the beauty of the world, the openings onto it. He who has gone further along, up to the beauty of the world itself, does not bear a lesser love for them, but a much greater one than before.

Among these are the pure and authentic achievements of art and science. Much more generally, it is everything that envelops human life in poetry across all social strata. Every human being is rooted here below by a certain earthly poetry, a reflection of the celestial light, which is his link, felt more or less vaguely, to the universal homeland. Affliction is uprooting.

Human cities especially, each according to its level of perfection, envelop the lives of their inhabitants with poetry. They are images and reflections of the world-city. Moreover, the more they have the form of nation, the more they pretend to be homelands themselves, the more they are images that are deformed and defiled. But to destroy cities either materially or morally, or else to expel human beings from the city by casting them onto the social scrap heap, is to sever every link of poetry and love between human souls and the universe. It is to plunge them forcibly into horror and ugliness. There is hardly a greater crime. We all have by complicity a share in an almost innumerable quantity of such crimes. We should all, if only we could comprehend it, be weeping tears of blood over it.

LOVE OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

The love of established religion, though the name of God is necessarily present in it, is nevertheless not in itself an explicit, but an implicit, love of God. For it does not contain a direct, immediate contact with God. God is present in religious practices, when they are pure, in the same way as in one's neighbour and in the beauty of the world, not more so.

The form that love of religion takes in the soul differs greatly according to the circumstances of life. Certain circumstances prevent this love from
315 even being born or kill it before it has been able to gain much strength. Some men, in affliction, develop hatred and contempt for religion despite themselves, because the cruelty, pride or corruption of some of its ministers

have made them suffer. Others have been raised from childhood in an environment permeated with this mindset. One must think that in such a case, by God's mercy, the love of one's neighbour and the love of the beauty of the world, if they are strong enough and pure enough, are sufficient to lead the soul to no matter what height.

The love of established religion normally has as its object the dominant religion of the country or the environment in which one has been raised. This is what every man initially thinks about every time he thinks about a service to God, as a result of habits that entered into his soul with his life.

The inherent power of religious practice can be construed in full following the Buddhist tradition concerning the recitation of the name of the Lord. It is said the Buddha had vowed to raise up to himself, in the Land of Purity, all those who would recite his name with the desire to be saved by him; and because of this vow the recitation of the name of the Lord really has the inherent power to transform the soul.

Religion is nothing other than this promise from God. Every religious practice, every rite, every liturgy is a form of the recitation of the name of the Lord, and should in principle actually have an inherent power; the inherent power of saving anyone who devotes himself to it with this desire.

All religions pronounce the name of the Lord in their language. Most often, it is better for a man to name God in his native language rather than in a foreign language. With a few exceptions, the soul is unable to abandon itself completely whenever it has to take on the slight effort of looking for words in a foreign language, however well-known.

A writer whose native language is impoverished, unwieldy, and little used in the world is very strongly tempted to adopt another. There have been a few brilliant successes, like Conrad, but very few. Barring exceptions, such a change is harmful, impairing thought and style; the writer will stay mediocre and ill at ease in his adopted language.

A change of religion is for the soul like a change of language for a writer. Not all religions, it is true, are equally apt for the proper recitation of the name of the Lord. Some are no doubt very imperfect intermediaries. The 316
religion of Israel, for example, must truly have been a very imperfect intermediary for Christ to have been crucified. The Roman religion was perhaps not deserving of the name religion at all.

But in general, the hierarchy of religions is something very difficult to discern, almost impossible, perhaps completely impossible. For a religion is

understood from the inside. Catholics say this of Catholicism, but it is true of every religion. Religion is a nourishment. It is difficult to judge by sight the flavour and nutritional value of a food that one has never eaten.

The comparison of religions is only possible to a certain extent through the miraculous, inherent power of sympathy. One can to a certain extent understand men if at the same time as one is observing them from outside one transports one's soul into them for a time by means of sympathy. Similarly the study of different religions does not lead to an understanding unless one transports oneself for a time, through faith, to the very centre of the religion one is studying. Through faith in the strongest sense of the term.

This almost never happens. For some are without faith; others locate faith exclusively in one religion and only give other religions the kind of attention given to strangely-shaped shells. Others still believe themselves capable of impartiality because they have a vague religiosity that they turn indiscriminately no matter where. On the contrary, one must have given all one's attention, all one's faith, all one's love to a particular religion in order to be able to think about any other religion with the highest degree of attention, faith and love possible within it. In the same way it is those who are capable of friendship, not others, who can also take a whole-hearted interest in the fate of a stranger.

In all domains, love is only real when directed at a particular object; it becomes universal without ceasing to be real by the effect of analogy and of transfer.

Parenthetically, the knowledge of what analogy and transfer are, knowledge for which mathematics, the various sciences and philosophy are a preparation, has in this way a direct connection to love.

Today, in Europe and perhaps even in the world, the comparative understanding of religions is next to nothing. There is not even the idea of the possibility of such an understanding. Even without the preconceptions that
317 obstruct us, even the vague idea of this understanding is already something very difficult. Between the different forms of religious life, there are, as partial compensation for the visible differences, certain hidden equivalences that perhaps only the most acute discernment can make out. Each religion is its own combination of explicit truths and implicit truths; what is explicit in one is implicit in some other. The implicit adherence to a truth can sometimes have as much of an effect as an explicit adherence, and sometimes even much more. He who knows the secret in hearts alone knows also the

secret in the different forms of faith. He has not revealed this secret to us, no matter what is said.

When one is born into a religion that is not too unsuited to the pronunciation of the name of the Lord, when one loves this native religion with a love well-directed and pure, it is difficult to conceive a legitimate reason for abandoning it, until such time as a direct contact with God subjects the soul to the divine will itself. Beyond this threshold, change is only legitimate through obedience. History shows in fact that this rarely happens. Most often, perhaps always, the soul arrived at the furthest spiritual reaches is vindicated in its love of the tradition that served as its ladder.

If the imperfection of the native religion is too great, or if in its native milieu it appears in a form that is too corrupted, or else if the circumstances have prevented the birth of the love of this religion or have killed it, the adoption of a foreign religion is legitimate. Legitimate and necessary for some; probably not for all. It is the same for those who have been raised without any religious practice.

In all other cases, changing religion is an extremely serious decision, and it is still more serious to push another to do so. It is infinitely more serious still to exert official pressure towards this end in conquered countries.

However, despite the religious differences that exist in the territories of Europe and America, one can justifiably say, directly or indirectly, in one way or another, that the Catholic religion is the native spiritual milieu of all the men of the white race.

The inherent power of religious practices consists in its efficacy for the destruction of evil from the contact with that which is perfectly pure. Nothing here below is perfectly pure save the total beauty of the universe, which it is not in our power to feel directly prior to having made a good deal of 318
progress towards perfection. Besides, this total beauty is not contained in anything perceptible, although in a sense it is perceptible.

Religious things are particular perceptible things, existing here below, and yet perfectly pure. Not in their own right. The church might be ugly, the singing off-key, the priest corrupt and the faithful distracted. In a sense this is of no importance. This is why if a geometer, to demonstrate a correct proof, draws a figure where the lines are crooked and the circles elongated, it does not matter. Religious things are pure by right, theoretically, *ex hypothesi*, by definition, by convention. Therefore their purity is unconditional. No defilement can touch it. That is why it is perfect. But not perfect

in the manner of Roland's mare that, with all possible virtues, had the drawback of not existing. Human conventions are ineffectual, unless they are attached to motives that move men to observe them. By themselves they are just abstractions; they are unreal and do nothing. But the convention under which religious things are pure is endorsed by God himself. It is thus an effectual convention, a convention that contains an inherent power, that in itself brings something about. This purity is unconditional and perfect, and at the same time real.

That is a truth of fact, which in consequence is not susceptible to proof. It is only susceptible to experiential verification.

In fact, the purity of religious things is manifest almost everywhere in the form of beauty, when faith and love are not lacking. Thus the words of the liturgy are marvellously beautiful; and above all the prayer delivered to us from the very lips of Christ is perfect. In like fashion, Romanesque architecture and Gregorian chant are marvellously beautiful.

But at the very centre there is something that is entirely devoid of beauty, where nothing makes purity manifest, something that is solely convention. It is necessary that this be so. The architecture, the hymns, the language, even if the words were put together by Christ, all of this is something other than absolute purity. The absolute purity here below that is present to our earthly senses as a particular thing can only be a convention, which would be mere convention and nothing else. This convention located at the central point is the Eucharist.

319 The absurdity of the dogma of the real presence constitutes its inherent power.[22] Except for the very moving symbolism of food, there is nothing in a piece of bread onto which the mind turned towards God can fasten. Thus, the conventional character of the divine presence is obvious. Christ can only be present in such an object by convention. He can be perfectly present in it, by this very fact. God can only be present here below in secret. His presence in the Eucharist is truly secret, since no part of our thought has access to the secret. It is therefore total.

No one is ever surprised that reasoning carried out using perfect lines and perfect circles that do not exist should have effective applications in engineering. Yet that is incomprehensible. The reality of the divine presence in the Eucharist is more marvellous, but not more incomprehensible.

22 This is the dogma that Christ is actually present in the Eucharist.

One could in a sense say, by analogy, that Christ is present in the consecrated host *ex hypothesi*, in the same way that a geometer says that there are two equal angles in a given triangle *ex hypothesi*.

It is because it is a matter of convention that the form of the consecration is alone important, not the spiritual condition of the one who consecrates.

If it were something other than a convention, it would be something at least partially human, not totally divine. A real convention is a supernatural harmony, taking harmony in the Pythagorean sense.

Here below only a convention can be the perfection of purity, for all non-conventional purity is more or less imperfect. That a convention should be real, is a miracle of divine mercy.

The Buddhist idea of the recitation of the name of the Lord has the same content, for a name is also a convention. However, the habit, in our thoughts, of confusing things with their names makes this easy to forget. The Eucharist is conventional to a higher degree.

Even the carnal and bodily presence of Christ was something other than perfect purity since he rebuked the one who called him good, since he said, "It is to your advantage that I should leave."[23] He is therefore probably more completely present in a piece of consecrated bread. His presence is more complete the more secret it is.

Yet this presence was no doubt still more complete, and also still more secret, in his carnal body, at the moment when the police grabbed hold of 320
this body like that of a felon. But also, he was then abandoned by all. His presence was too much. It was not bearable for men.

The convention of the Eucharist or any other analogue is indispensable to man; the perceptible presence of perfect purity is indispensable to him. For man can only direct the fullness of his attention upon something perceptible. And he sometimes needs to direct his attention upon perfect purity. This act alone can enable him, by a process of transfer, to destroy a part of the evil that is in him. This is why the host is really the Lamb of God which takes away one's sins.

Everyone senses the evil in themselves, has a horror of it and would be rid of it. Outside of ourselves, we see evil in two distinct forms, suffering and sin. But in the sense about ourselves that we have this distinction does not appear, except abstractly and through reflection. We sense something in

23 Jn 16:7.

ourselves that is neither suffering nor sin, that is one and the other at the same time, the root common to both, an indistinct mix of the two, defilement and pain at the same time. It is the evil in us. It is the ugliness in us. The more we feel it the more we abhor it. The soul ejects it just as one vomits. The soul conveys it by a process of transference into the things around us. But the things, becoming thus ugly and defiled in our eyes, send back the evil that we have put into them. They send it back to us increased. In this exchange the evil in us grows. It then seems to us that the very places where we are, the very environment where we are living, imprisons us in evil further every day. That is a terrible anguish. When the soul, exhausted by this anguish, no longer even feels it, there is little hope for its salvation.

This is how a patient comes to have a hatred and disgust for his room and surroundings, a convict his prison, and too often a worker his factory.

For those who are like this, it is pointless to give them beautiful things. For there is nothing that does not with time end up being defiled to the point of horror by this process of transference.

Only perfect purity cannot be defiled. If, at the moment when the soul is invaded by evil, the attention is focused on a perfectly pure thing thereby transferring a part of the evil into it, that thing is not altered by it. It does not send the
321 evil back. Thus each minute of this kind of attention really destroys a bit of evil.

What the Hebrews tried to accomplish by means of a kind of magic, in their ritual of the scapegoat, can only be performed here below through perfect purity.[24] The true scapegoat is the Lamb.

The day when a perfectly pure being found himself here below in human form, the greatest possible quantity of diffuse evil around him was automatically concentrated upon him in the form of suffering. At this time, in the Roman Empire, the greatest affliction and the greatest crime of men was slavery. That is why he underwent the ordeal that was the most extreme in the affliction of slavery. This transfer mysteriously became the Redemption.

Similarly, when a human being focuses his gaze and his attention on the Lamb of God present in the consecrated bread, a part of the evil he carries in him is directed onto the perfect purity and there suffers a destruction.

Rather than a destruction, it is a transmutation. The contact with perfect purity breaks down the indissoluble mix of suffering and sin. The portion of

24 Lv 16:8–26.

evil carried within the soul which has been burned by the fire of this contact becomes only suffering, and a suffering suffused by love.

In the same way, all the diffuse evil within the Roman Empire which was concentrated upon Christ became in him only suffering.

If here below there were not perfect and infinite purity, if there were only finite purity that the contact with evil depletes over time, we could never be saved.

Penal justice provides a dreadful illustration of this truth. In principle it is something pure, which has the good as its object. But it is an imperfect, finite, human purity. Therefore, the uninterrupted contact with crime and affliction mixed together depletes this purity and puts in its place a defilement about equal to the totality of crime, a defilement that by far surpasses that of a particular criminal.

Men neglect to drink from the spring of purity. But Creation would be an act of cruelty if this spring did not well up everywhere where there is crime and affliction. If there had been no crime and affliction in the centuries more than two thousand years before us, or in the lands untouched by the missions, one might believe that the Church had a monopoly on Christ and the sacraments. How, without accusing God, can one bear the thought of a 322
single slave crucified twenty-two centuries ago, if one thinks that at that time Christ was absent and every kind of sacrament unknown? Granted, one gives little thought to slaves crucified twenty-two centuries ago.

When one has learned to focus one's gaze onto perfect purity, the limited duration of human life alone precludes being sure that, barring perfidy, one will reach perfection here below. For we are finite beings; the evil in us is also finite. The purity that is offered to our eyes is infinite. However little evil we may destroy each time we look, it is certain, were it not for the limit of time, that by repeating the process often enough all evil would one day be destroyed. We would then have got to the end of evil, to use the splendid expression in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. We would have destroyed evil for the Lord of Truth, and would bring him truth, as the *Egyptian Book of the Dead* says.

One of the principal truths of Christianity, today all but unknown, is that looking is what saves. The serpent of bronze was lifted up so that men, lying maimed in the depths of degradation, might look at it and be saved.

It is in moments when one is, as they say, ill-disposed, when one feels incapable of the elevation of the soul appropriate for sacred matters, it is then that looking focused on perfect purity is the most efficacious. For it is then

that evil, or rather mediocrity, rises to the surface of the soul, into the best position for being burned by contact with the fire.

But also, the operation of looking is then nearly impossible. The whole mediocre part of the soul, fearing death with a fear more violent than that caused by the approach of bodily death, revolts and brings out lies to protect itself.

The effort not to listen to these lies, though one cannot help oneself from believing them, this effort of looking at purity is then something very violent; yet it is something absolutely different from all of what is generally called effort, forcing oneself, or an act of will. Different words would be needed to talk about it, but language does not have them.

The effort by which the soul saves itself resembles the effort by which one looks, by which one listens, by which a fiancée says yes. It is an act of attention and consent. By contrast, what language calls the will is something analogous to muscular effort.

The will is on the level of the natural part of the soul. The proper exercise
323 of the will is no doubt a necessary condition for salvation, but is indirect, lesser, very much subordinate, and purely negative. The muscular effort of the farmer pulls out the weeds, but the sun and the water alone make the wheat grow. The will does not produce any good within the soul.

Efforts of will have their place only in the fulfilment of strict obligations. Where there is no strict obligation, one must follow either natural inclination or vocation, that is to say God's command. Acts proceeding from inclination are evidently not efforts of will. And in acts of obedience to God, one is passive; whatever the hardships accompanying them, whatever the apparent level of activity, nothing analogous to muscular effort occurs in the soul; there is only waiting, attention, silence, and immobility throughout the suffering and the joy. Christ's crucifixion is the model for all acts of obedience.

This kind of passive activity, the highest of all, is perfectly described in the *Bhagavad-gītā* and in Lao Tzu. Here too there is the supernatural unity of opposites, harmony in the Pythagorean sense.

The will's effort towards the good is one of the lies emitted by the mediocre part of ourselves in its fear of being destroyed. This effort does not threaten that part at all, it does not even diminish its comfort, and that is so even when it is accompanied by a lot of fatigue and suffering. For the mediocre part of ourselves does not fear fatigue and suffering, it fears being killed.

There are people who try to elevate their soul like a man who keeps on jumping straight up might do, in the hope that by dint of jumping higher

every day he will one day no longer come back down, but will rise right up into the sky. Occupied in this way, he cannot look at the sky. We cannot take even one step towards the sky. The vertical direction is forbidden to us. But if we look at the sky for a long time, God comes down and takes us away. He takes us away with ease. As Aeschylus says, "that which is divine is effortless."[25] There is in salvation an ease more difficult for us than any effort.

In one of Grimms' fairy tales, there is a contest of strength between a giant and a little tailor. The giant throws a stone so high that it takes a very long time before coming back down. The little tailor releases a bird that does not come back down. That which has no wings always ends up coming back down.

It is because the will is powerless to bring about salvation that the notion of secular morality is an absurdity. For what is termed morality calls only 324
upon the will, and upon what is most muscular in it. Religion by contrast aligns with desire, and it is desire that saves.

The Roman caricature of Stoicism also calls upon the muscular will. But the true Stoicism, Greek stoicism, from which John, or perhaps Christ, borrowed the terms λόγος and πνεῦμα [*logos* and *pneuma*],[26] is solely desire, piety and love. It is full of humility.

The Christianity of today, on this point like so many others, has let itself be contaminated by its adversaries. The metaphor of the search for God evokes efforts of the muscular will. Pascal, it is true, has contributed to the success of this metaphor. He did make some mistakes, notably that of confusing faith and autosuggestion to some extent.

In the grand images of mythology and folklore, in the parables of the Gospels, it is God who pursues man. "*Quaerens me sedisti lassus*."[27] Nowhere in the Gospels is it a matter of a pursuit undertaken by man. Man does not take a step unless pushed or else expressly called. The role of the future spouse is to wait. The slave waits and watches while the master is at a feast. The passer-by does not invite himself to the wedding banquet, he does not ask for an invitation; he is led there almost by surprise; his sole task is to don suitable clothing.[28] The man who has found a pearl in a field sells all his possessions

25 Aeschylus, *Suppliant Women*, line 100.
26 Weil added these transliterations in the margin.
27 "Pursuing me, you sat down, tired". verse X of the *Dies Irae*.
28 Allusion to Mt 22:1–12.

to buy that field; he does not need to turn over the field with a spade to unearth the pearl, it is enough that he sell all his possessions. Desiring God and renouncing everything else, that alone is what saves.

The stance that brings about salvation does not resemble any activity. The Greek word that expresses it is ὑπομονή [*hupomenê*][29] which *patientia* translates rather poorly. It is attending, the attentive and faithful motionlessness that lasts indefinitely and that no blow can shake. The slave who listens by the door so as to open it as soon as the master knocks is the best image of it. He must be ready to die of hunger and exhaustion rather than alter his posture. His friends must be able to call to him, speak to him, hit him without him even turning his head. Even if he is told that the master is dead, even if he
325 believes it, he will not budge. If he is told that the master is angry with him and will beat him on his return, and he believes it, he will not budge.

Active pursuit is detrimental, not only to love, but also to the intelligence whose laws imitate those of love. One must simply wait for the solution to a geometry problem, or for the meaning of a Latin or Greek sentence to arise in the mind. Even more so for a new scientific truth, for a beautiful verse. Pursuit leads to error. This is so for every kind of true good. Man must do nothing other than wait for good and ward off evil. He must make no muscular effort save that so as not to be shaken by evil. In the inversion that makes up the human condition, genuine virtue in all domains is something negative, at least in appearance. But this waiting for good and for truth is something more intense than any pursuit.

The idea of grace as opposed to deliberate virtue, and that of inspiration as opposed to intellectual or artistic work, these two ideas express, if they are well understood, this efficacy of attending and of desire.

Religious practices are entirely constituted by attention animated by desire. That is why no morality can replace them. But the mediocre part of the soul has many lies in its arsenal capable of protecting it even during prayer or participation in the sacraments. In between the looking and the presence of perfect purity it places veils that it is clever enough to call God. These veils are, for example, moods, sources of sensuous joy, hope, solace, consolation or relief, or a set of habits, or one or more human beings, or else a social setting.

29 Weil added this transliteration in the margin.

A trap that is difficult to avoid is the attempt to imagine the divine perfection that religion gives us to love. Under no circumstances can we imagine anything more perfect than ourselves. Such an attempt renders useless the marvel of the Eucharist.

Some training of the intelligence is needed to be able to contemplate within the Eucharist only what is by definition enclosed in it; namely something we are totally ignorant about, about which we know only, as Plato said, that it is something, and that nothing else is ever desired except in error.

The trap of traps, the almost unavoidable trap, is the trap of the social. Everywhere, always, in all things, the social feeling provides a perfect imitation of faith, perfectly deceptive that is. This imitation has the great advantage of satisfying all the parts of the soul. The part which desires the good believes it is being nourished. The part which is mediocre is not hurt by the light. It is completely at ease. In this way, everybody is in accord. The soul is at peace. But Christ said that he did not come to bring peace. He brought the sword, the sword that sunders in two, as Aeschylus says. 326

It is almost impossible to distinguish faith from its social imitation. All the more so as the soul can have one part genuine faith and one part imitated faith. Almost impossible, but not impossible.

In the present circumstances, repelling the social imitation is perhaps for faith a question of life and death.

The requirement for a perfectly pure presence to strip away defilement is not restricted to the churches. People come bringing their various defilements into the churches, and that is all very well. But it would be much more in keeping with the spirit of Christianity if in addition to this Christ could take his presence into the places most defiled with shame, misery, crime and affliction, into the prisons, the courts, and the shelters for the poor. A session of the court should begin and end with a joint prayer by the judges, the police, the accused, and the public. Christ should not be absent from the places where one works, from those where one studies. All human beings, whatever they do, wherever they are, should be able to have their eyes fixed all day every day on the serpent of bronze.

But it should also be recognised publicly, officially, that religion does not consist in anything other than a gaze. So long as it claims to be anything else, it is inevitable that it will be confined to the inside of churches, or that it will suffocate everything anywhere else where it is found. Religion should not claim to occupy a place in society other than the one which pertains

to supernatural love within the soul. But it is also true that many people degrade the charity in themselves because they want to make it occupy too great and too visible a place in their soul. Our Father dwells only in secret. Love does not come without modesty. True faith involves a great discreetness even in relation to itself. It is a secret between God and us in which we ourselves have almost no part.

The love of one's neighbour, the love of the beauty of the world, and the
327 love of religion are loves that are in a sense completely impersonal. The love of religion might easily not be so, because religion has a connection to a social setting. The very nature of the religious practices must remedy this. At the centre of the Catholic religion there lies a bit of formless matter, a bit of bread. The love directed to this morsel of matter is necessarily impersonal. It is not the human person of Christ such as we imagine him, it is not the divine person of the Father also subject by us to all the errors of our imagination, it is this fragment of matter which is at the centre of the Catholic religion. It is this which is most scandalous in it and it is in what its most marvellous inherent power lies. In all authentic forms of religious life there is something similar that guarantees its impersonal character. The love of God must be impersonal, for as long as there has not yet been direct and personal contact; otherwise it is an imaginary love. Thereafter it must be both personal and once again impersonal in a higher sense.

FRIENDSHIP

But there is a personal and human love that is pure and that contains an intuition and reflection of divine love. This is friendship, provided that this word is used strictly in its proper sense.

Preference for a human being is necessarily something different from charity. Charity is undiscriminating. If it arises somewhere in particular, its sole cause is the happenstance of affliction which occasions the exchange of compassion and gratitude. It is equally available for all humans and for as long as affliction may come and offer anyone such an exchange.

Personal preference toward a determinate human being can be of two kinds. Either one seeks a certain good in the other or one needs him. Broadly speaking, all possible attachments divide into these two kinds. One is moved towards something because one pursues a good in it or because one cannot do without it. Sometimes the two motives coincide. But often not. In

themselves they are distinct and completely independent. One eats disgusting food, if one has nothing else, because one cannot do otherwise. A man 328
moderately fond of good food seeks out the finer things, but easily does without. If one has no air, one suffocates; one struggles to get it, not because one expects some good from it, but because one needs it. One goes out to breathe the sea air, without being propelled by any necessity, because one enjoys it. Often the passage of time automatically replaces the first motive with the second. This is one of the great human sorrows. A man smokes opium to gain access to a special state that he considers superior; often, after a while, opium puts him into a distressing state that he feels is degrading; but he can no longer do without it. Arnolphe bought Agnès from her adoptive mother, because it seemed to him that it would be good for him to have a young girl in his household whom he might gradually make into a good wife. Later on she no longer causes him anything except heartrending and demeaning torment. But with time his attachment to her has become a vital connection[30] which compels him to utter the terrible line:

> *But I feel in all this that I shall have to expire . . .*[31]

Harpagon began by looking upon gold as a good.[32] Later on it is no longer anything except the object of a nagging obsession, but an object whose loss would kill him. As Plato said, there is a great difference between the natures of the necessary and the good.[33]

There is no contradiction between seeking a good from a human being and wanting good for him. For that very reason, when the motive that is moving one towards a human being is solely the pursuit of a good from him, the conditions for friendship are not realised. Friendship is a supernatural harmony, a union of opposites.

30 The word 'vital' is used here to mean that which is essential to—or constitutive of—life. This is more evident in discussion of 'vital energy' on the following page, where the sense is close to what might be called vegetative energy.

31 Molière, *The School for Wives*, Act IV, Scene 1.

32 Weil is referring here to the principal character in Molière's *The Miser, or the School for Lies*.

33 *Republic* VI 493c. Often cited in her notebooks, this idea is fundamental to Weil's philosophical undertaking.

When a human being is to some degree necessary, one cannot want his good, without ceasing to want one's own. Where there is necessity, there is compulsion and domination. One is at the mercy of that which one needs, unless one has ownership of it. The central good for every man is self-determination. One either renounces it, which is a crime of idolatry since one does not have the right to renounce it except in favour of God; or one desires that the being one needs should be deprived of it.

All sorts of mechanisms can bind human beings together with bonds of affection that have the iron hardness of necessity. Maternal love is often of
329 this nature, sometimes paternal love, as in Balzac's *Father Goriot*; carnal love in its most intense form, as in *The School for Wives* and in *Phèdre*; marital love very frequently, mainly as a result of habit; more rarely filial or sibling love.

There are however degrees in necessity. Necessary to some degree is everything whose loss actually causes a diminution of vital energy, in the precise and strict meaning that this word could have if the study of vital phenomena were as advanced as that of falling bodies. At the extreme end of necessity, privation leads to death. This is the case when all the vital energy of one being is tied to another by an attachment. In the lesser degrees, privation leads to a more or less significant weakening. That is why complete deprivation of food results in death, whereas partial privation leads only to a weakening. Nonetheless, one views as necessary that quantity of food below which a human being is weakened.

The most common cause of necessity in the bonds of affection is a certain combination of sympathy and habit. As in the case of miserliness or intoxication, that which was at first pursuit of a good is transformed into need by the simple passage of time. But unlike with miserliness, intoxication and all the vices, in the bonds of affection the two motives, pursuit of a good, and need, can very easily co-exist. They can also be separate. When the attachment of one human being to another is constituted by need alone, it is a terrible thing. Few things in this world can reach this degree of ugliness and horror. There is always something horrible in any circumstance where a human being seeks good and finds only necessity. The stories in which a loved one suddenly appears with a death's head is the best image of it. The human soul possesses, it is true, a whole arsenal of lies to protect itself against this ugliness and to fabricate in the imagination false goods where there is only necessity. It is for this very reason that ugliness is an evil, because it compels lying.

In a wholly general way, there is affliction whenever necessity, whatever its form, makes itself felt so harshly that the harshness exceeds the capacity for lying in the one who undergoes its shock. That is why the most pure beings are the most exposed to affliction. For the one who is capable of inhibiting the automatic reaction of protection, which tends to increase the capacity for 330
lying in the soul, affliction is not an evil, although it is always a wound and, in a sense, a degradation.

When a human being is attached to another by a bond of affection containing any degree of necessity, it is impossible that he should wish for the preservation of autonomy both in himself and in the other. Impossible by virtue of the mechanism of nature. But possible through the miraculous intervention of the supernatural. This miracle is friendship.

"Friendship is an equality composed of harmony," said the Pythagoreans.[34] There is harmony because there is supernatural unity between the two opposites that are necessity and freedom, those two opposites that God combined by creating the world and men. There is equality because one desires the preservation of the faculty of free consent in oneself and in the other.

When someone desires to subordinate a human being to himself or is willing to subordinate himself to him, there is no trace of friendship. Racine's Pylades is not Orestes' friend. There is no friendship in inequality.

A certain reciprocity is essential to friendship. If on one of the two sides all favourable disposition is entirely absent, the other must eliminate the affection in himself out of respect for free consent which he must not desire to subvert. If on one of the two sides there is no respect for the autonomy of the other, the latter must sever the bond out of respect for himself. Likewise, he who is willing to be subservient himself cannot gain friendship. But the necessity contained in the bond of affection may exist on only one side, and in that case there is friendship on only one side if one takes the word in a completely precise and strict sense.

A friendship is defiled as soon as necessity prevails, even for an instant, over the desire to preserve the faculty of free consent in both of them. In all things human, necessity is the ingredient of impurity. Every friendship is impure if it has in it even a trace of the desire to please or the converse desire. In a perfect friendship these two desires are completely absent. The

34 DK58B1. See also "Concerning the Pythagorean Doctrine".

two friends are completely willing to be two and not one, they respect the distance that the fact of being two distinct creatures puts between them. It is with God alone that man has the right to desire to be directly united.

Friendship is the miracle by which a human being is willing to look from a distance and not to approach the very being who is necessary for him like food. This is the strength of spirit Eve did not have; and yet she did not need
331 the fruit. If she had been hungry at the moment when she looked at the fruit, and if despite that she had stayed looking at it evermore without taking a step towards it, she would have accomplished a miracle analogous to that of perfect friendship.

Through this supernatural virtue of respect for human autonomy, friendship is very similar to the pure forms of compassion and gratitude elicited by affliction. In both cases the opposites that are the terms of the harmony are necessity and freedom, alternatively subordination and equality. These two pairs of opposites are equivalent.

Owing to the fact that the desire to please and the converse desire are absent from pure friendship, there is in friendship, at the same time as affection, something like a complete indifference. Despite its being a bond between two persons, it has something impersonal to it. It does not undermine impartiality. It does not in any way prevent imitating the perfection of the heavenly Father who spreads the light of the sun and the rain everywhere. On the contrary, friendship and this imitation are mutual conditions for each other, most often at least. For as every human being, or nearly so, is bound to others by bonds of affection containing some degree of necessity, he cannot approach perfection except by transforming that affection into friendship. Friendship has something universal about it. It consists in loving a human being as one would like to be able to love in their particularity each of those who compose humankind. Just as a geometer looks at a particular figure to deduce the universal properties of a triangle, so the one who knows how to love directs upon a particular human being a universal love. Consent to the preservation of autonomy in oneself and in others is in essence something universal. As soon as one desires this preservation in more than just one being one desires it in all beings; for one then ceases to arrange the order of the world in a circle around a centre that is to be found here below. One transfers the centre beyond the skies.

Friendship does not have this virtue if the two beings who love each other believe, by an illegitimate use of their affection, that they are but one. But

there is then also no love in the true sense of the word. It is, so to speak, an adulterous union, even were it to take place between spouses. There is friendship only where distance is preserved and respected.

The mere fact of taking pleasure in thinking about any point in the same way as a loved one, or at any rate the fact of desiring such an agreement in opinions, is an offence against the purity of the friendship at the same time 332
as against intellectual probity. This is very common. But then a pure friendship is rare.

When the bonds of affection and necessity between human beings are not supernaturally transformed into friendship, not only is the affection impure and base, but it is also mixed with hatred and repulsion. This is shown very well in *The School for Wives* and in *Phèdre*. The mechanism is the same in affections other than carnal love. It is easy enough to understand. We hate that on which we depend. We come to be disgusted by that which depends on us. Sometimes the affection is not only mixed, it is entirely transformed into hatred and disgust. The transformation is sometimes even almost immediate, such that hardly any affection has had the time to appear; this is the case when the necessity is laid bare almost at once. When the necessity that binds human beings is not of an emotional kind, when it is due solely to the circumstances, antipathy often arises from the start.

When Christ said to his disciples, "Love one another," it was not attachment that he was requiring of them.[35] As there were in fact bonds between them resulting from common thought, life in common, and habits, he was commanding them to transform these bonds into friendship so that they should not turn into impure attachments or into hatred.

Christ having added just before his death this pronouncement as a new commandment to the commandments of the love of one's neighbour and the love of God, one might think that pure friendship, like the charity for one's neighbour, contains something like a sacrament. Christ had perhaps wanted to signal this regarding Christian friendship when he said, "When two or three of you will have gathered in my name, I shall be among them."[36] Pure friendship is an image of the original and perfect friendship which is that of the Trinity and which is the very essence of God. It is impossible that

35 Jn 13:34–35.
36 Mt 18:20.

two human beings be one, and yet scrupulously respect the distance which separates them, if God is not present in each of them. The meeting point of parallels is infinitely distant.

IMPLICIT LOVE AND EXPLICIT LOVE

Even the most narrow-minded Catholic would not dare to claim that com-
333 passion, gratitude, love of the beauty of the world, love of religious practices, and friendship were the monopoly of the centuries and the countries where the Church has been present. These loves in their purity are rare, but it would be difficult to go as far as to claim that they were more common in these centuries and these countries than in others. To believe they could come into being somewhere Christ is absent is to diminish Christ to the point of offending against him; it is an impiety, all but a sacrilege.

These loves are supernatural; and in a sense they are absurd. They are mad. So long as the soul has not had any direct contact with the very person of God, they cannot rely on any knowledge based on either experience or reasoning. They cannot therefore be relied upon with any certainty, unless one uses the word in a metaphorical sense to designate the opposite of hesitation. Consequently it is preferable that they should not be accompanied by any belief. This is intellectually more honest, and it better preserves the purity of love. It is in every respect more suitable. Concerning divine matters, belief is not suitable. Certainty alone is suitable. Anything less than certainty is unworthy of God.

During the preparatory period, these indirect loves constitute an ascending movement of the soul, a gaze turned with some effort upwards. Once God has come in person not only to visit the soul, as He does at first for a long while, but to take hold of it, by transferring its centre alongside himself, it is otherwise. The chick has pierced the shell, it is outside the egg of the world. These first loves persist, they are more intense than before, but they are different. He who has gone through this adventure now loves more than he ever did the afflicted, those who help him in misfortune, his friends, religious practices, and the beauty of the world. But these loves have become a descending movement like God's own, a ray merged into the light of God. At least one can assume as much.

These indirect loves are simply the attitude toward beings and things here below of the soul oriented towards the good. They do not themselves have

a good as their object. There is no good here below. Thus, strictly speaking, they are not loves. They are loving attitudes.

In the preparatory period the soul loves in a void. It does not know whether something real answers this love. It may believe that it knows. But believing is not knowing. Such a belief does not help. The soul only knows with certainty that it is hungry. What matters is that it cries out in hunger. A child does not stop crying out if it is suggested to him that there might not 334
be any bread. He cries out just the same.

The danger is not that the soul doubts whether there is bread or not, but that it persuades itself through a lie that it is not hungry. It cannot persuade itself of this except through a lie, for the reality of its hunger is not a belief, it is a certainty.

We all know that there is no good here below, that all that appears here below as good is finite, limited, and gets used up and, once used up, leaves necessity exposed in its nakedness. Every human being has probably had several moments in his life when he has squarely admitted to himself that there is no good here below. But as soon as one has seen this truth one covers it over with deceit. Many even revel in proclaiming it by seeking a morbid pleasure in sadness, many who have never been able to endure looking this truth in the face for more than a second. Men sense that there is mortal danger in looking at this truth for any length of time. That is true. This knowledge is more deadly than a sword; it inflicts a death more frightening than bodily death. Over time it kills everything in us that we call me. In order to hold onto this knowledge one has to love truth more than life. Those who do so, in Plato's words, turn away from that which is fleeting with their whole soul.[37]

They do not turn to God. How could they, in total darkness? God himself imparts the proper orientation to them. He does not however show himself to them for a long time. It is for them to remain motionless, without looking away, without ceasing to listen, and to wait for they know not what, deaf to appeals or threats, unwavering under blows. If, after a long wait, God permits vaguely intuiting his light or even reveals himself in person, it is but for an instant. Once again, one has to remain motionless, attentive, and wait, without budging, calling out only when desire is too strong.

37 *Republic* 518c-d.

It is not for a soul to believe in the reality of God if God does not reveal this reality. Either it places the name of God like a label on something else, and this is idolatry; or the belief in God remains abstract and verbal. This is how it is in countries and eras where raising a doubt about religious dogma does not even cross one's mind. The condition of non-belief is then what Saint John of the Cross called a night. The belief is verbal and does not penetrate the soul. In an era like ours, unbelief can be equivalent to the dark night of Saint John of the Cross if the unbeliever loves God, if he is like the
335 child who does not know whether there is bread somewhere, but still cries out that he is hungry.

When one is eating bread, and even once one has eaten it, one knows that the bread is real. One can nevertheless raise a doubt about the reality of bread. Philosophers raise a doubt about the sensible world. But it is a purely verbal doubt, which does not undermine one's certainty, which even makes it more evident to a well-oriented mind. Similarly, one to whom God has revealed his reality can, without suffering any inconvenience, raise a doubt about this reality. It is a purely verbal doubt, an exercise useful for the health of the intelligence. What however is a crime of perfidy, even before such a revelation, much more so after, is to raise a doubt about God being the only thing that deserves to be loved. That is looking away. Love is the soul looking. It is stopping for a moment to wait and to listen.

Electra does not search for Orestes, she waits for him. When she believes that he no longer exists, that nowhere in the world is there anything which is Orestes, she does not on that account draw closer to those around her. She draws away from them with greater revulsion. She loves the absence of Orestes better than the presence of anyone else. Orestes was to deliver her from her slavery, from her rags, menial work, grime, hunger, blows and innumerable humiliations. She no longer hopes for this. But not for an instant does she think of using an alternative path which can secure for her a luxurious and honoured life, the path of reconciliation with the strongest. She does not want to gain affluence and recognition if it is not Orestes who secures them for her. She does not give so much as a thought to these things. All that she desires is not to exist now that Orestes does not exist.

At that point Orestes cannot hold out any longer. He cannot help but identify himself. He gives decisive proof that he is Orestes. Electra sees him, she hears him, she touches him. She will no longer wonder whether her saviour exists.

The one on whom the fate of Electra has been visited, the one who has seen, heard and touched, with his soul itself, that one recognises in God the reality of those indirect loves which were like reflections. God is pure beauty. Yet that is something incomprehensible, for beauty is in its essence perceptible. To speak of a non-perceptible beauty seems an abuse of language to anyone having in mind the least requirement for rigour; and rightly so. Beauty is always a miracle. But there is a miracle of the second order when a soul receives an impression of non-perceptible beauty, if it relates not to an abstraction, but 336
a real and direct impression like that caused by a song at the moment when it is heard. Everything happens as if, because of a miraculous favour, it had become manifest to sensibility itself that silence is not an absence of sounds, but something infinitely more real than sounds, and the centre of a harmony more perfect than the most beautiful harmony that combined sounds are capable of. Yet there are degrees of silence. There is a silence in the beauty of the universe which is as a noise in relation to the silence of God.

God is also the real neighbour. The term person is properly applied only to God, and also the term impersonal. God is the one who bends over us, the afflicted, reduced to being just a bit of inert and bleeding flesh. But at the same time, He is somehow also that afflicted man who appears to us only under the aspect of an inanimate body from which all thought seems to be absent, that afflicted man whose standing or name no one knows. The inanimate body is this created universe. The love that we owe to God, and which would be our supreme perfection if we were able to achieve it, is the divine model of gratitude and compassion at the same time.

God is also the quintessential friend. So that there should be something like an equality between Him and us, across the infinite distance, He has decided to place in his creatures an absolute, the absolute freedom to consent or not consent to the orientation towards Him that he imparts to us. He has also extended our possibilities for error and deceit to the point of allowing to us the capacity to dominate spuriously in our imagination not only the universe and men, but also God himself, for as long as we do not know how to make a proper use of this name. He has given us this capacity for infinite illusion so that we should have the power of renouncing it through love.

Finally, contact with God is the real sacrament.

But one can be almost sure that those in whom the love of God has made the pure loves here below disappear are false friends of God.

One's neighbour, one's friends, the religious ceremonies, and the beauty of the world do not fall to the order of unreal things after direct contact between the soul and God. On the contrary, it is only then that these things become real. Before that they were half-dreams. Before that, there was no reality.

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

Weil completed this extensive essay immediately prior to her departure from Marseilles in April 1942. Written at the behest of Father Perrin, this essay responds to the question of how a spiritual aspirant, or an ordinary person, can prepare to love God. To prepare, Weil elaborates how each person can, in their earthly life, incubate in themselves, in specific ways, God's virtue. On her account earthly life is not something to endure, but the very place where the love of God becomes real.

21

GOD'S LOVE AND AFFLICTION[1]

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In the domain of suffering, affliction is a thing apart, specific, and irreducible. It is altogether different than simple suffering. It takes hold of the soul and marks it to its very core with a mark that belongs to it alone, the mark of slavery. Slavery such as was practiced in Ancient Rome is only the extreme form of affliction. The ancients, who were well acquainted with the matter, used to say, "A man loses half his soul the day he becomes a slave." 347

Affliction is inseparable from physical suffering and yet completely distinct from it. With suffering, anything not connected to physical pain or to something analogous is artificial or imaginary, and can be erased by an appropriate shift in one's thinking. Even with the absence or the death of a loved one, the irreducible part of grief is something like a physical pain, a

1 The French title of this essay, "L'amour de Dieu et le malheur", was rendered in a previous translation as "The love of God and affliction". English readers thus often read this to mean "The love of God and *of* affliction", and thus take Weil to be urging the love of affliction, a thought which accords with a widespread, mistaken perception of Weil as having a morbid preoccupation with self-destruction. Weil is clear and emphatic that no one can desire affliction. The title used here also primes the reader for Weil's argument for an interdependence between God's love and affliction. God originated the necessity required for our existence, one of whose consequences is the existence of affliction; affliction in turn can function to move individuals towards the love of God.

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difficulty in breathing, a tightening around the heart, or like an unsatisfied need, a hunger, or like an almost biological disorder caused by the sudden release of an energy formerly oriented by an attachment now left undirected. A grief which is not concentrated around such an irreducible core is merely romanticism or literary. Humiliation too is a violent state of the whole corporeal being which wants to erupt under the outrage, but must be held back, constrained by impotence or fear.

By contrast, a purely physical pain is of no account and leaves no trace in the soul. Toothache is an example of this. A few hours of violent pain caused by a decayed tooth, once passed, become nothing.

It is otherwise with a very long or very frequent physical suffering. But such a suffering is often something other than suffering; it is often affliction.

Affliction is an uprooting of life, a varyingly attenuated simulacrum of death, made irresistibly present to the soul by the immediate touch or dread of physical pain. If physical pain is completely absent, there is no affliction
348 for the soul, because thought makes for some other object. Thought flees affliction with as little hesitation or resistance as an animal flees death. Here below there is only physical pain and nothing else that has the capacity to shackle thought; provided that one assimilates to physical pain certain phenomena difficult to describe, yet corporeal, which are strictly equivalent to it. Dread of physical pain, especially, is of this kind.

When thought is compelled by an attack of physical pain, however slight, to recognise the presence of affliction, it results in a state as wrenching as if a condemned man were compelled to look for hours at the guillotine that is going to cut off his head. Human beings can live on for twenty, fifty years in this wrenching state. One comes across them without noticing it. What man is able to recognise them, unless Christ himself looks through his eyes? One only notices that they sometimes have an odd way of behaving, and one reproaches this behaviour.

There is no true affliction unless the circumstances that have seized a life and uprooted it touch it directly or indirectly in all its parts, social, psychological and physical. The social factor is essential. There is no true affliction where there is not some form of fall in social standing or fear of such a fall.

Between affliction and the sorrows which, even if they are very severe, very deep and very lasting, are strictly speaking something other than affliction, there is both continuity and separation at a threshold, as with the boiling point of water. There is a point beyond which there is affliction and not

before it. This point is not purely objective; all sorts of personal factors enter into the matter. The same circumstance can plunge one human being into affliction and not another.

The great enigma of human life is not suffering, it is affliction. It is not surprising that innocents are killed, tortured, driven from their country, reduced to misery or slavery, or held inside camps or prison cells, since there will always be criminals to carry out these actions. It is not surprising either that disease imposes prolonged sufferings that paralyse life and turn it into a picture of death, since nature is subject to a blind play of mechanical necessities. But it is surprising that God should have given to affliction the power 349
to seize the very soul of the innocent and make itself its sovereign master. At best, the one marked by affliction will keep only half his soul.

Those who have been dealt one of those blows after which a being struggles on the ground like a half-crushed worm, they do not have the words to express what is happening to them. Among the people they meet, those who, even having suffered much, have never had contact with affliction properly speaking, have no idea what it is. It is something specific, not reducible to anything else, like sounds, whose idea nothing can convey to a deaf-mute. And those who have themselves been maimed by affliction are in no state to help anyone at all, and almost incapable of even desiring to do so. Thus compassion towards the afflicted is an impossibility. When it truly occurs, it is a miracle more astonishing than walking on water, healing the sick and even resurrecting a dead man.

Affliction compelled Christ to plead to be spared, to seek consolations from men, to believe himself forsaken by his Father. It compelled a righteous man to cry out against God, a righteous man as perfect as merely human nature allows, more so perhaps if Job is less a historical person than a figure of Christ. "He laughs at the affliction of innocents."[2] This is not a blasphemy, it is an authentic cry wrenched out of the pain. The *Book of Job* is, from beginning to end, a pure marvel of truth and authenticity. On the subject of affliction, anything that deviates from this model is more or less defiled with falsehood.

Affliction makes God absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in a completely dark cell. A type of horror engulfs

2 Jb 9:23.

the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love, the absence of God becomes definitive. It is necessary that the soul continue to love in the void, or at least continue to want to love, even if only with an infinitesimal part of itself. Then one day, God will come to show himself to the soul and reveal to it the beauty of the world, as in the case of Job. But if the soul ceases to love, it at once falls here below into something almost equivalent to hell.

That is why those who plunge into affliction men not prepared to receive
350 it are killing souls. On the other hand, in a time like ours where affliction hangs over everyone, the help provided to souls is not effective unless it goes as far as to really prepare them for affliction. This is no small matter.

Affliction hardens and fills with despair because it impresses into the depths of the soul, as if with a hot iron, that contempt, disgust and even repulsion for oneself, that sensation of culpability and defilement, which crime should logically produce but does not. Evil inhabits the soul of the criminal without being felt there. It is felt in the soul of afflicted innocents. Everything happens as if a state of the soul which was by its nature appropriate to a criminal had been detached from crime and attached to affliction; and that even in proportion to the innocence of the ones afflicted.

If Job cries out his innocence in an accent so despairing, it is because he himself cannot believe in it, it is because in him his soul is taking the side of his friends. He implores the testimony of God himself, because he no longer hears the testimony of his own conscience; for him it is no longer anything but an abstract and dead memory.

Man has his bodily nature in common with animals. Chickens rush to peck at a wounded chicken. It is an occurrence as mechanical as gravity. All the contempt, all the repulsion, all the hate that our reason attaches to crime, our sensibility attaches to affliction. Except for those whose whole soul is filled by Christ, everyone more or less despises the afflicted, though scarcely anyone is conscious of doing so.

This law of our sensibility applies also with regard to ourselves. This contempt, this repulsion, and this hate, in the afflicted one, are turned against himself, penetrate to the centre of the soul, and from there tint the entire universe with their poisoned colours. Supernatural love, if it has survived, can prevent this second effect from taking place, but not the first. The first is the very essence of affliction; there is no affliction where it does not take place.

"He was made accursed for our sake."[3] It is not only the body of Christ, hung on wood, which was made accursed, it is also his whole soul. Likewise every innocent in affliction feels himself cursed. This is so even for those who have been in affliction and have been pulled out of it by a change of fortune, if they were bitten deeply enough.

Another effect of affliction is to make the soul its accomplice, little by little, by injecting it with a poison of inertia. In anyone who has been in affliction long enough, there is a complicity regarding his own affliction. This complicity hinders any effort that he might undertake to improve his lot; it goes as far as preventing him from seeking ways to be delivered, sometimes even to the point of preventing him from wishing for deliverance. He is then settled into affliction and people may believe he is satisfied. Still more, this complicity can push him despite himself to evade or to flee the means of deliverance; it then veils itself behind sometimes ridiculous pretexts. Even in the one who has been pulled out of affliction, if he has been forever bitten to the depths of his soul, something remains that pushes him to plunge back into it, as if the affliction were implanted in him like a parasite and was directing him for its own ends. Sometimes this impulsion overrides all the movements of the soul towards happiness. If the affliction came to an end through an act of kindness, this impulsion can be accompanied with a hatred of the benefactor; that is the cause of certain seemingly inexplicable acts of savage ingratitude. It is sometimes easy to deliver someone afflicted from his present affliction, but it is difficult to liberate him from his past affliction. God alone can do so. And even the very grace of God heals not here below a nature injured irreparably. The glorious body of Christ bore its wounds. 351

One cannot accept the existence of affliction except by considering it as a distance.

God has created through love, for love. God has not created anything other than love itself and the capacity for love. He has created every form of love. He has created beings capable of love at all possible distances. He went himself, because no other could do so, to the maximum distance, the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God and God, this supreme sundering, this pain to which nothing else comes close, this marvel of love, this is the

3 Gal 3:13, which in this context refers to our redemption.

Crucifixion. Nothing can be further from God than that which was made accursed.

This sundering across which supreme love places the join of supreme union resonates perpetually throughout the universe, in the depths of silence, like two notes separate yet fused, like a pure and heartrending harmony. That is the Word of God. The entirety of creation is only the vibration of it. When human music in its greatest purity pierces our soul, it is this that we hear through it. When we have learned to hear silence, this is what we apprehend, most distinctly, through it.

352 Those who persevere in their love hear this note at the very bottom of the ruin into which they have been brought by affliction. From that moment on they can no longer have any doubt.

Men struck by affliction are at the foot of the Cross, almost at the greatest possible distance from God. One must not believe that sin is a greater distance. Sin is not a distance. It is a misorientation of one's gaze.

True, there is a mysterious relation between this distance and an original disobedience. Originally, we are told, humanity has turned its gaze away from God and walked in the wrong direction as far as it could go. That is because it could walk then. We, however, are nailed in place, free only in our gaze, subject to necessity. A blind mechanism, which takes no account of the degree of spiritual perfection, continually buffets men and throws some of them to the very foot of the Cross. It is only for them to keep or not keep their eyes turned towards God through the jolts. It is not that God's Providence is absent. It is by his Providence that God has willed necessity as a blind mechanism.

If the mechanism were not blind, there would be no affliction at all. Affliction is above all anonymous, it strips those it takes of their personhood and makes things of them. It is indifferent, and it is the cold of this indifference, a metallic cold, that freezes to the very depths of the soul all those it touches. They will never again regain warmth. They will never again believe that they are someone.

Affliction would not have this inherent power without the element of chance contained in it. Those who are persecuted for their faith and know this, whatever they might have to suffer, are not afflicted. They fall into affliction only if the suffering or the fear fill the soul to the point of making them forget the cause of the persecution. The martyrs given over to beasts who entered the arena singing were not the afflicted. Christ was

one of the afflicted. He did not die as a martyr. He died as a common criminal, mixed with thieves, only a bit more ridiculous. For affliction is ridiculous.

Only blind necessity can throw men to the furthermost point, right beside the Cross. The human crimes that are the cause of most afflictions are part of blind necessity, for the criminals know not what they are doing.

353 Friendship has two forms, meeting and separation. They are indissoluble. They enclose the same good, the one good, the friendship. For when two beings who are not friends are near each other, there is no meeting. When they are away from each other, there is no separation. Enclosing the same good, the two forms are equally good.

God occasions himself, knows himself perfectly, as we in our miserable fashion make and know of objects outside ourselves. But before all, God is love. Before all, God loves himself. This love, this friendship in God, is the Trinity. Between the terms united by this relation of divine love, there is more than proximity; there is infinite proximity, there is identity. But through the Creation, the Incarnation and the Passion, there is also an infinite distance. The totality of space and the totality of time, interposing their expanse, sets an infinite distance between God and God.

Lovers or friends have two desires. One is to love each other such that they enter into one another and make but one single being. The other is to love each other such that even having half the globe between them their union suffers no diminution. All that man desires in vain here below is perfect and real in God. All those impossible desires are in us like a sign of our purpose, and they are good for us once we no longer hope to realise them.

The love between God and God, which itself is God, is this bond of a dual power; that bond which unites two beings to the point where they are not distinguishable and really are one, that bond which extends over distance and overcomes an infinite separation. The unity of God in which all plurality disappears, the abandonment in which Christ believes he finds himself without ceasing to love his Father perfectly, these are two forms of the inherent, divine power of the same Love, which is God himself.

God is so essentially love that unity, which is in a sense his very definition, is a simple effect of love. And the infinitely unifying, inherent power of this love is matched by the infinite separation which it overcomes, which is all of creation, spread across the totality of space and time, made of mechanistically brute matter, interposed between Christ and his Father.

For us men, our misery gives us the infinitely precious privilege of having a share in this distance placed between the Son and the Father. But this distance is separation only for those who love. For those who love, the separation, however painful, is a good, because it is love. Even the distress of
354 the abandoned Christ is a good. There cannot be for us here below a good greater than having a share of it. Here below God cannot be perfectly present to us on account of the flesh. But in extreme affliction he can be almost perfectly absent from us. It is for us on earth the sole possibility of perfection. It is why the Cross is our sole hope, "No forest bears such a tree, with this flower, this foliage, and this seed."[4]

This universe where we live, of which we are a particle, is this distance put by divine love between God and God. We are a point in this distance. Space, time, and the mechanism which governs matter are this distance. Everything that we call evil is just this mechanism. God has ensured that his grace, when it penetrates to the very core of a man and from there illuminates all his being, allows him, without violating the laws of nature, to walk on water. But when a man turns away from God he simply gives himself over to gravity. Thereafter he believes that he wills and chooses, but he is only a thing, a stone that falls. If one looks at human souls and societies closely, with a truly attentive gaze, one sees that everywhere where the inherent power of supernatural light is absent, everything obeys mechanical laws as blind and as precise as the laws of falling bodies. This knowledge is beneficial and necessary. Those that we call criminals are only tiles loosened from a roof by the wind and falling by chance. Their only fault is the initial choice which has made them into these tiles.

The mechanism of necessity is transposed at every level while remaining like itself in brute matter, plants, animals, peoples, and souls. Looked at from the point where we are, according to our perspective, it is completely blind. But if we transport our heart outside ourselves, outside space and time, to where our Father is, and if from there we look at this mechanism, it appears quite different. What seemed like necessity becomes obedience. Matter is complete passivity, and hence obedience to the will of God. It is a perfect model for us. There can be no being other than God and that which obeys God. For its perfect obedience matter deserves to be loved by those who love its Master, as a lover looks with tenderness at the needle once used by

4 Part of the first verse of "Crux Fidelis", a component of the hymn *Pange Lingua*.

a beloved woman now dead. We become alerted to that portion of our love that matter deserves through the beauty of the world. In the beauty of the world brute necessity becomes an object of love. Nothing is as beautiful as 355
gravity within the fugitive folds of the sea's undulations or the almost eternal folds of the mountains.

The sea is no less beautiful in our eyes because we know that sometimes ships sink. It is, on the contrary, more beautiful for it. If it altered the movement of its waves to spare a ship, it would be a being endowed with judgement and choice rather than this fluid, that is perfectly obedient to every external pressure. It is this perfect obedience that is its beauty.

All the horrors which happen in this world are like the folds impressed upon the waves by gravity. That is why there is a beauty in them. Sometimes a poem, such as the *Iliad*, renders this beauty perceptible.

Man cannot ever get out of obedience to God. A creature cannot not obey. The only choice offered to man as an intelligent and free creature is to desire obedience or not to desire it. If he does not desire it, he obeys nonetheless, perpetually, as a thing subject to mechanical necessity. If he does desire it, he remains subject to mechanical necessity, but a new necessity is added to it, a necessity constituted by the laws proper to supernatural things. Certain actions become impossible for him, others are done through him, at times almost despite him.

When one has the feeling that on some particular occasion one has disobeyed God, this simply means that for a while one had ceased to desire obedience. Obviously, all things being equal, a man will not do the same actions irrespective of whether or not he consents to obedience; just as a plant, all things being equal, does not grow in the same way irrespective of whether it is in light or in darkness. The plant exercises no control, no choice, in the matter of its own growth. We however, we are like plants which would have the single choice of whether or not to put themselves in the light.

Christ offered us the docility of matter as a model in advising us to look upon the lilies of the field which neither toil nor spin.[5] That is to say, they did not set out to don this or that colour, they did not put their will in motion nor did they have the means to do so, everything they have received was provided to them by natural necessity. If they appear to us infinitely more beautiful than rich textiles, it is not by being richer, but through this

5 Mt 6:28; Lk 12:27–28.

356 docility. Fabric is also docile, but docile to man, not to God. Matter is not beautiful when it obeys man, only when it obeys God. If, in a work of art, matter sometimes appears almost as beautiful as in the sea, mountains or flowers, it is because God's light has filled the artist. To find beautiful the things made by men not illumined by God, one must come to understand with one's whole soul that these men are themselves matter which obeys without knowing it. For the one who is at that point, absolutely everything here below is perfectly beautiful. In everything that exists, in all that happens, he discerns the mechanism of necessity, and in that necessity he savours the infinite sweetness of obedience. This obedience of things is for us, in relation to God, what the transparency of a windowpane is in relation to light. Once we experience this obedience in our entire being, we see God.

When we hold a newspaper upside down, we see the strange shapes of the printed characters. When we put it right side up, we no longer see the characters, we see the words. The passenger of a boat caught in a storm experiences each jolt like an upheaval in his innards. The captain apprehends in it only the complex combination of wind, current, and swell together with the disposition of the boat, its shape, its sail, and its rudder.

Just as one learns to read, or as one learns a trade, so too one learns to experience in all things, above all and almost exclusively, the obedience of the universe to God. It is truly an apprenticeship. Like any apprenticeship, it demands effort and time. For anyone who completes it, there is no longer a difference between things, between events, other than the difference experienced by someone who can read when presented with the same sentence reproduced several times, written in red ink or blue ink, printed with this, that or the other typeface. Someone who cannot read sees only the differences. For anyone who can read, those are all equivalent, since the sentence is the same. For anyone who has completed his apprenticeship, things and events are, everywhere, always, the vibration of the same infinitely sweet divine word. That does not mean that he does not suffer. Pain is the colouring of certain events. Presented with a sentence written in red ink, the one who can read and the one who cannot both see the red; but the red colouring does not have the same importance for each of them.

When an apprentice is injured, or else complains of tiredness, the factory
357 workers and the farmers have this beautiful saying, "It is the trade getting into his body." Each time we suffer pain, we can tell ourselves truthfully that it is the universe, the order of the world, the beauty of the world, the

obedience of creation to God that is entering us through the body. Therefore, how could we not bless with the most tender gratitude the Love which sends us this gift?

Joy and pain are equally precious gifts, which must both be savoured whole, each in its purity, without seeking to mix them. Through joy the beauty of the world penetrates into our soul. Through pain it enters us in the body. With joy alone, we could no more become friends of God than become a ship's captain solely by reading manuals on navigation. The body has a role in every apprenticeship. At the level of physical sensibility, pain alone is a contact with that necessity which constitutes the order of the world; for pleasure does not contain the impression of a necessity. It is a higher part of the sensibility that is capable of experiencing necessity in joy, and that only through the intermediary of the feeling of beauty. For our being to become one day sensitive in its entirety, through and through, to that obedience which is the substance of matter, for there to form in us that new sense that allows hearing the universe as being the vibration of the speech of God, the transformative, inherent power of pain and of joy are each equally indispensable. One must open the very centre of the soul to one and to the other when one or the other comes to us, as one opens the door to the messengers of one's beloved. What can it matter to a lover whether the messenger is polite or abrupt, as long as he hands her a message?

But affliction is not pain. Affliction is something very different than a pedagogical method of God.

The infinity of space and time separates us from God. How should we look for him? How should we go towards him? Even if we walked for centuries on end, we should do nothing other than go round and round the earth. Even in an airplane, we would not be able to do anything else. We are not able to advance vertically. We cannot take one step towards the heavens. God passes across the universe and comes all the way to us.

Over the infinity of space and time, the infinitely more infinite love of God comes to take hold of us. It comes in its own time. We have the power to consent to receive it or to refuse. If we remain deaf, it comes and comes 358
again like a beggar, but also, like a beggar, one day comes no more. If we consent, God places a small seed in us and goes away. From this moment on, God has nothing more to do and neither do we, except to wait. We have only not to regret the consent that we have given, the nuptial 'I do'. This is not as easy as it seems, for the growth of the seed within us is painful. Moreover,

from the very fact that we accept this growth, we cannot help but destroy what would impede it, pull up weeds, or cut back couch grass; and unfortunately this couch grass is part of our very flesh, with the result that caring for this garden is a violent operation. Nonetheless the seed, in the end, grows all by itself. A day comes when the soul belongs to God, when it not only consents to the love, but when it really, truly loves. It must then in its turn pass across the universe to go all the way to God.

The soul does not love with a created love, like a creature. This love within it is divine, uncreated, for it is the love of God for God which passes through the soul. God alone is capable of loving God. We are able only to consent to let go of the feelings that belong to us so as to allow passage to this love in our soul. That is what it means to negate oneself. We are created only for this consent.

Divine love has passed across the infinity of space and time to go from God to us. But how can it repeat the crossing in reverse when it starts from a finite creature? When the seed of divine love deposited within us has grown, has become a tree, how can we, we who are bearing it, bring it back to its origin, make the journey that God has made to us in the reverse direction, passing across the infinite distance?

That seems impossible, but there is a way. We know this way well. We well know the likeness in which this tree was made, this tree that has grown in us, this tree so beautiful where the birds of the sky alight. We know which is the most beautiful of all trees. "No forest bears its equal." Something a little more dreadful still than a gallows, here is the most beautiful of trees. It is this tree whose seed God has placed in us, without our knowing what this seed was. If we had known, we would not have said yes on that first occasion. It is this tree which has grown in us, which has become impossible to uproot. Only a betrayal can uproot it.

When one strikes a nail with a hammer, the shock received by the broad
359 head of the nail passes in its entirety into the tip, without any loss, even though it is only a point. Even if the hammer and the head of the nail were infinitely large, everything would still happen in the same way. The tip of the nail would transmit this infinite shock to the point where it is applied.

Extreme affliction, which is at once physical pain, distress of the soul and social degradation, constitutes this nail. The tip is pressed to the very centre of the soul. The head of the nail is all necessity scattered across the totality of space and time.

Affliction is a marvel of divine craft. It is a simple and ingenious mechanism for bringing into the soul of a finite creature this immensity of blind, brute, and cold force. The infinite distance that separates God from the creature is gathered in its entirety into one point to pierce a soul at its centre.

The man to whom such a thing happens, has no part in this process. He struggles like a butterfly pinned alive in an album. But throughout the horror he can continue to want to love. There is here no impossibility, no obstacle, one might almost say no difficulty. For the greatest pain, as long as it is short of fainting, does not touch that point in the soul that consents to a proper orientation.

It is vital to know that love is an orientation and not a frame of mind. If one is ignorant of this one falls into despair at the first onset of affliction.

He whose soul stays oriented towards God while it is pierced by a nail finds himself nailed to the very centre of the universe. It is the true centre, which is not midway, which is outside space and time, which is God. From a dimension which does not belong to space, which is not time, which is an altogether different dimension, this nail has pierced a hole through creation, through the expanse of the screen that separates the soul from God.

By means of this marvellous dimension, the soul, without leaving the place and the time where the body to which it is bound is situated, can pass across the totality of space and time and reach the very presence of God.

The soul is situated at the intersection of creation and Creator. This point of intersection is the one where the two lengths of the Cross meet.

Saint Paul was thinking perhaps of things of this kind when he said, "Be rooted in love, so as to be able to grasp what are the breadth, the length, the height and the depth, and to know that which passes all knowledge, the love 360
of Christ."[6]

To be, in the event of extreme affliction, nailed to the very cross of Christ, one must carry in one's soul, at the time when the affliction strikes, not only the divine seed, but the tree of life already formed.

6 Eph 3:17–19. This quotation also marks the end of the first part of the manuscript of this essay which Weil gave to Father Perrin. It was initially the only part of the essay that was published. Weil continued to revise her draft of the second half of the essay after her departure from Marseilles and sent the completed revision to Father Perrin a few weeks later. The second half was joined to the first in later publications. The version translated here is complete.

Otherwise, one has the choice between the crosses that were to either side of Christ's.

One is like the bad thief when one seeks a consolation in contempt and hatred of fellow sufferers. That is the most common effect of true affliction. It was the case for slavery in Rome. Those who are surprised when they see such a state of mind in the afflicted would almost all fall into it themselves if affliction were to befall them.

To be like the good thief, it is enough to realise that, whatever the degree of affliction into which one is thrust, one has deserved at least that much. For before being reduced to powerlessness by affliction, one has certainly made oneself an accomplice, by cowardice, inertia, indifference or culpable ignorance, to crimes which brought other beings into an affliction at least as great. No doubt one generally could not prevent these crimes, but one could have said one condemned them. One omitted to do so, or even approved of them, or at least let it be said by others that one |*condemned*|[7] them. The affliction that one undergoes is not in strict justice too great a punishment for this complicity; one does not have the right to have compassion for oneself. One knows that at least once a perfectly innocent being suffered a worse affliction; it is better to direct compassion towards him across the centuries.

Everyone can and should say all this to himself, for there are things so heinous within our institutions and our mores that none can legitimately believe himself absolved of this pervasive complicity. Certainly everyone is guilty at least of criminal indifference.

But more than that each man has the right to desire to have a share in the very cross of Christ. We have an unlimited right to ask God for all that is good. It is not in such requests that one should be humble or moderate.

One must not desire affliction; that is against nature; it is a perversion; and
361 above all affliction is by nature that which one undergoes despite oneself. If one is not immersed in it, one can only desire that were it to strike it would constitute a participation in the cross of Christ.

But what is in fact perpetually present, what is therefore always permissible to love, is the possibility of affliction. The three sides of our being are always exposed to it. Our flesh is fragile; any chunk of matter in motion can

7 Weil crossed out this word without replacing it, though a likely replacement, 'approve of', can be inferred from the first clause of the sentence.

pierce it, sever it, smash it, or even damage one of the inner workings for good. Our soul is vulnerable, subject to depressions without cause, pitiably dependent on all sorts of things and beings, themselves fragile and capricious. Our social person, on which all but depends the sense of our existence, is constantly and entirely exposed to every accident. The very centre of our being is tied to these three things by fibres such that it feels even the slightest injuries to them to the point where it is itself bleeding. Above all what diminishes or destroys our social prestige, our right to consideration, seems to alter or abolish our very essence, so much so that we have illusion as our substance.

This nearly infinite fragility is not something one thinks about when everything is going fairly well. But nothing forces one not to think about it. One can continually look at it, and continually thank God for it. Not only give thanks for the fragility itself, but also for that innermost weakness that carries this fragility to the very centre of our being. For it is this weakness that makes possible, in certain circumstances, the operation that will nail us to the very centre of the Cross.

We can think about this fragility with love and gratitude at the time of any kind of suffering, great or small. We can think about it in moments that are fairly indifferent. We can think about it at the time of every joy. One ought not do so if this thought were of a nature to disturb or diminish the joy. But this is not how it is. With it, joy only becomes of a more penetrating and poignant sweetness, just as the fragility of cherry blossoms only increases their beauty.

If one disposes one's thinking in this way, then after some time the Cross of Christ will become the very substance of life. This is no doubt what Christ meant when he was advising his friends to bear their cross each day, and not, as some seem to believe today, mere resignation to small, everyday troubles that in an almost sacrilegious abuse of language is sometimes called the 362
cross. There is but one cross, it is the totality of necessity that fills the infinity of time and space, which can, in certain circumstances, be concentrated upon the atom that each and every one of us is and pulverise it entirely. To bear one's cross is to bear the knowledge that one is entirely subject to this blind necessity, in all parts of one's being, except for one point in the soul so secret that consciousness does not reach it. However cruelly a man suffers, if a part of his being is intact, and if he is not fully aware that it escaped by chance and remains at every moment exposed to the blows of fate, he has

no share in the Cross. This is so especially if the part of his being left intact, or which is at least more or less spared, is the social part. That is why ill health is of no use if the spirit of poverty in its perfection is not joined to it. A perfectly happy man can simultaneously fully enjoy happiness and bear his cross, if he is really, concretely and at every moment aware of the possibility of affliction.

But it is not enough to recognise this possibility, one must love it. One must love tenderly the harshness of this necessity which is like a medallion with two faces, the face turned towards us being domination, the face turned towards God being obedience. We must clasp it in our arms, even if it presents us its barbs and that we in embracing it cause it to enter our flesh. Whoever loves is happy to clutch, in the absence of the beloved, an object belonging to them to the point of its penetrating the flesh. We know that this universe is an object belonging to God. We must thank God from the bottom of our heart for having given us as absolute sovereign necessity, his slave, insensate, blind and perfectly obedient. It leads us with the whip. But being subject here below to its tyranny, it is enough that we choose God for our treasure, that we put our heart in God; and thereafter we will see the other face of this tyranny, the face which is pure obedience. We are the slaves of necessity, but we are also the sons of its Master. Whatever it may command, we must love the sight of its docility, we who are the children of the house. Every time that necessity does not do what we want, that it forces us to undergo what we do not want, it is given to us by love to pass across it and to see the side of obedience that it shows to God. Blessed are those who often have this precious opportunity.

363 Intense and long-lasting physical pain has the unique advantage that our sensibility is made so as to be incapable of accepting it. We can get used to, acquiesce to, or adapt ourselves to anything other than that, and we adapt ourselves so as to have the illusion of power, to believe that we are in control. We play at imagining that we have chosen what is imposed on us. When a human being is in his own eyes transformed into an almost paralysed and utterly repugnant kind of beast, he can no longer have this illusion. It is better still if this transformation is effected by the will of men, as a result of a social disapproval, provided that it be an act of in some sense anonymous oppression rather than an attack on one's honour. The carnal part of our soul is sensitive to necessity only as compulsion, and is sensitive to compulsion only as physical pain. It is the same truth that enters carnal

sensibility through physical pain, intelligence through mathematical proof, and the faculty of love through beauty. Job too, once the veil of flesh is torn off by affliction, sees the naked beauty of the world. The beauty of the world appears when one recognises necessity as the substance of the universe, and obedience to a perfectly wise Love as the substance of necessity. This universe of which we are a fragment has no other being than being obedient.

Sensible joy has an inherent power analogous to that of physical pain when it is so vibrant, so pure, when it so exceeds expectation, that we immediately recognise ourselves incapable of obtaining anything like it for ourselves or of securing our possession of it. Such joys always have beauty as their essence. Pure joy and pure pain are two aspects of the same infinitely precious truth. Fortunately so, for thanks to this one has the right to wish those that one loves joy rather than pain.

The Trinity and the Cross are the two poles of Christianity, the two essential truths, the one perfect joy, the other perfect affliction. The knowledge of the one and of the other and of their mysterious unity is essential, but here below we are placed by the human condition infinitely far from the Trinity, at the very foot of the Cross. The Cross is our homeland.

The knowledge of affliction is the key to Christianity. But this knowledge is impossible. It is impossible to know affliction without having passed through it. For thought is so averse to affliction that it is as incapable of bringing itself voluntarily to conceive of it, as an animal, with few exceptions, is incapable of suicide. Thought knows affliction only through compulsion. It is impossible to believe without being compelled to do so by experience that everything in one's soul, all thoughts, feelings, and attitudes in relation to ideas, men and the universe, and above all the inmost attitude of a being toward himself, that all this is entirely at the mercy of circumstance. Even if one recognises it theoretically, which is already very rare, one does not believe it with one's whole soul. To believe it with one's whole soul, is what Christ called not renouncement or abnegation, as it is usually translated, but negating oneself, and it is the condition making one worthy to be his disciple. But when one is in affliction or one has passed through it, one does not believe this truth more than before, it could almost be said that one believes it even less. For thought can never truly be constrained, it always has a licence to evade through falsehood. Thought placed under the constraints of circumstance facing affliction flees into falsehood with the alacrity with which an animal threatened with death flees into a haven that

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opens up before it. Sometimes, in its terror, thought sinks very deeply into falsehood; thus it often happens that those who are or have been in affliction have become infected with falsehood like a vice, sometimes as far as to have lost in all things the very sense of truth. It is wrong to reproach them for it. Falsehood is so closely tied to affliction that Christ has conquered the world by the sole fact that being the Truth, he remained the Truth all the way to the very depth of extreme affliction. Thought is compelled to flee the countenance of affliction by an instinct for self-preservation infinitely more essential to our being than the one that keeps us from bodily death; it is relatively easy to expose oneself to the latter when, as a result of circumstances or some play of the imagination, it does not present itself with the countenance of affliction. One cannot look affliction in the face and up close with a steady attention unless one accepts the death of the soul out of love for the truth. It is this death of the soul that Plato spoke of when he said, "to philosophise is to learn to die," which was symbolised in the initiation rites of the ancient mysteries and which is represented by baptism.[8] It is not a matter of the soul dying in reality, but simply of recognising the truth that it is something dead, something analogous to matter. It does not have to become water; it is water; what we believe to be our self is a product of external circumstances as fleeting and as automatic as the form of a wave in the sea.

365 One needs only to know this, to know it deep within oneself. But God alone has this knowledge of man and, here below, only those who have been begotten from above. For one cannot accept this death of the soul if one does not have in addition to the illusory life of the soul another life; if one does not have his treasure and his heart outside himself; not only outside his person, but outside all his thoughts, outside all his feelings, beyond all that is knowable, in the hands of our Father who is in secret. Of those who are like this, it can be said that they have been begotten from water and the Spirit. For they are no longer anything but a dual obedience, to mechanical necessity on the one hand in which they are caught by the fact of their terrestrial condition, and to divine inspiration on the other. There is no longer anything in them that could be called their own will, their person, their self. They are no longer anything other than a certain intersection of nature and God. This intersection is the name by which God has

8 Plato, *Phaedo* 67e.

called them for all of eternity, it is their calling. In the ancient baptism, by immersion, the man disappeared under the water; that is to negate oneself, to avow that one is only a fragment of the inert matter of which creation is made. He would only reappear lifted by an ascending movement stronger than gravity, the image of divine love within man. The symbol that baptism embodies is the state of perfection. The promise attached to baptism is that of desiring this state and asking God for it, constantly, tirelessly, for as long as one has not got it, as a hungry child never leaves off asking his father for bread. But what such a promise commits one to cannot be known until one has been in the presence of the terrible face of affliction. Only in this place, face to face with affliction, can the true commitment be made through a contact more secret, more mysterious, and more miraculous even than a sacrament.

The knowledge of affliction being impossible naturally as much for those who have experienced it as for those who have not, it is equally possible for one as for the other by supernatural favour. Otherwise Christ would not have spared from affliction the one he cherished above all, after having promised him that he should drink from his cup.[9] In both cases the knowledge of affliction is a thing much more miraculous than walking on water.

Those whom Christ recognised as having been his benefactors are those whose compassion was based on the knowledge of affliction. The others give capriciously, irregularly, or, on the contrary, too regularly as the result 366
of habits imprinted in education, or conformity with social conventions, or pride, or a visceral pity, or else the desire for a good conscience, in short, from a motive that concerns them themselves. They are haughty, or assume a patronising tone, or express an intrusive pity, or they let the afflicted man feel that for them he is only an example of a certain species of affliction. In any case, their benefaction is an injury. And they have their reward here below, since their left hand is not unaware of what their right hand has given.[10] Their contact with the afflicted can only be made through falsehood, since true knowledge of the afflicted involves knowledge of affliction. Those who have not looked upon the countenance of affliction, or are not prepared to do so, can only approach the afflicted protected by the veil of a lie or an

9 Mt 20:22–23; Mk 10:38–39.
10 Mt 6:3.

illusion. If by chance the countenance of affliction suddenly appears on the face of an afflicted man, they take flight.

The benefactor of Christ, when in the presence of one afflicted, does not feel any distance between the afflicted and himself; he transports his whole being into the other; thereafter the action of giving him food is as instinctive, as immediate, as is eating when he is himself hungry. And it is almost at once forgotten just as the meals of days past are forgotten. Such a man would not think to say that he is looking after the afflicted for the Lord; that would appear to him as absurd as saying that he is eating for the Lord. One eats because one cannot help it. Those whom Christ will thank give as they eat.

They give something very different than food, clothes or care. In transporting their very being into the one they help, they give him for an instant that existence of his own of which he is deprived by affliction. Affliction is essentially a destruction of the personality, a passage into anonymity. Just as Christ emptied himself of his divinity by love, the afflicted is emptied of his humanity by ill fortune. He no longer has any existence other than this ill fortune itself. In the eyes of others and in his own eyes, he is entirely determined by his relation to affliction. Something in him that would very much like to exist is continually thrown back into nothingness, like a drowning man whose head is being struck by repeated blows. He is, as the case may be, a pauper, a refugee, a negro, a madman, a felon, or anything of the sort. The ill treatment and the kindly acts of which he is the object are in like manner
367 directed towards affliction of which he is one example among many others. Thus ill-treatment and kindly acts have the same effect of forcibly keeping him in anonymity and are two forms of the same offence.

He, who in seeing an afflicted man transports his being into him, births in him by love, at least for a moment, an existence independent of affliction. For though affliction may be the occasion of this supernatural operation, it is not its cause. The cause is the sameness of human beings across all the apparent distances put between them by chance and fortune.

To transport one's being into one afflicted, is to assume his affliction for a moment, to take on voluntarily that whose very essence consists in being imposed by compulsion and against one's will. This is an impossibility. Christ alone has done it. Christ alone can do it, and those men whose whole soul is occupied by Christ. These men, in transporting their own being into the afflicted they help, place in him, not really their own being, since they no longer have it, but Christ himself.

Almsgiving thus practiced is a sacrament, a supernatural operation by which a man inhabited by Christ really places Christ into the soul of the afflicted. The bread thus given, if bread is used, is equivalent to the host. Here it is not a symbol or a conjecture, but a literal translation of Christ's own words. For he says, "It is unto me that you have done it."[11] He is therefore in the starving or naked afflicted man. But not as an effect of hunger or nakedness, for affliction by itself does not contain any gift from above. This can only be through the operation of the benefaction. That Christ is in the one who gives in a perfectly pure way is obvious; who then could Christ's benefactor be, if not himself? Besides it is easy to understand that only the presence of Christ within a soul can put true compassion into it. But the Gospel further reveals to us that he who gives through true compassion gives Christ himself. The afflicted who receives this miraculous gift has the choice of consenting to it or not.

An afflicted man, if the affliction is complete, is deprived of any human relationship. For him there are only two types of relation possible with men, those where he figures only as a thing, which are as mechanical as the relation between two adjoining drops of water, and purely supernatural love. The intermediate region is barred to him. There is no place in his life for anything but water and Spirit. Affliction which is consented, accepted, and loved is truly a baptism.

It is because Christ alone is capable of compassion that during his sojourn 368
on earth he did not receive any. Being flesh here below, he did not live within the souls of any of those around him; and so none could have pity for him. Pain compelled him to beg for compassion, and his closest friends refused it to him. They left him to suffer alone. Even John slept. Peter had been able to walk on water, but he was not able to pity his master, fallen into affliction. They took refuge in slumber so as not to see him any longer. When Mercy itself becomes affliction, where would it find succour? It would have needed another Christ to have pity on the afflicted Christ. In the course of the following centuries compassion for the affliction of Christ has been one of the signs of saintliness.

The supernatural operation of almsgiving, unlike for example that of communion, does not require a complete cognisance. For those whom

11 Mt 25:40.

Christ thanks respond, "Lord, when then did we feed you? . . ."[12] They did not know whom they had fed. Generally speaking, nothing at all indicates that they had had any cognisance of Christ. They might or might not have had any. What matters is that they were just. Hence it was the Christ in them that was giving himself in the form of alms. Blessed are the beggars, since there is the possibility that they might receive once or twice in their lives perhaps such alms.

Affliction is truly at the centre of Christianity. The fulfilment of the one and dual commandment, "Love God" and "Love thy neighbour," passes through affliction. For concerning the first, Christ said, "None comes to the Father if not through me."[13] He also said, "As Moses raised high the serpent in the desert, even so must the son of man be raised high, so that whosoever believes in him should possess life eternal."[14] The serpent is that serpent of bronze which one had only to look upon to be saved from the effects of poison. One can therefore only love God by looking upon the Cross. And concerning the neighbour, Christ has said who the neighbour is toward whom love is commanded. It is the naked body, bleeding and unconscious, that one sees lying in the road.[15] It is first and foremost affliction that we are commanded to love, man's affliction, God's affliction.

Christianity is often reproached for a morbid indulgence with regard to suffering and pain. This is a mistake. In Christianity, the question is not that of pain or of suffering, which are sensations or moods in which it is always
369 possible to take perverse delight. The question is about something quite different. The question is that of affliction. Affliction is not a frame of mind. It is a pulverisation of the soul through the mechanical brutality of circumstance. The transmutation of a man, in his own eyes, from the state of being human to the state of a half-crushed worm twitching on the ground is not a process in which even a pervert could delight. A sage, a hero or a saint do not delight in it either. Affliction is that which is imposed on a man altogether in despite of himself. It has as its essence and its very definition this horror, this revolt of the whole being in the one over whom it takes hold. It is that very thing to which one must consent through the inherent power of supernatural love.

12 Allusion to Mt 25:37–39.
13 Jn 14:6.
14 Jn 3:14–15 and Nm 21:4–9.
15 Lk 10:29–37.

To consent to the existence of the universe is our function here below. It is not enough for God to find his creation good. He wants further that it itself find itself good. This is what the souls attached to minuscule fragments of this world are for. That is the goal of affliction, to allow us to think that God's creation is good. For as long as circumstances around us play out so that they leave our being fairly intact, or with only scrapes and bruises, we believe more or less that our will has created the world and governs it. Affliction teaches us all of a sudden, to our very great surprise, that this is not so. If now we praise, it is truly God's creation that we praise. And where is the difficulty? We well know that our affliction does not in any way diminish the divine glory. It does not therefore prevent us in any way from extolling God for his great glory.

Thus affliction is the surest sign that God wants to be loved by us; it is the most precious testimony to his tenderness. It is altogether different than paternal punishment. It would be more fitting to compare it to the tender quarrels by which newly engaged couples assure themselves of the depth of their love. One does not have the courage to look upon the countenance of affliction; otherwise, after a while, one would see that it is the face of love; just as Mary Magdalene realised that the man she had taken for a gardener was someone else.[16]

Christians, seeing the central place of affliction in their faith, ought to suspect that affliction is in one sense the very essence of creation. To be creatures is not necessarily to be afflicted, but it is necessarily to be exposed to affliction. The uncreated alone is indestructible. One asks why does God permit affliction, one could just as well ask why did God create. That, it is true, one can well ask. Why did God create? It seems so obvious that God is greater 370
than God and the creation together. At least this seems obvious if one thinks of God as being. But one should not think of him in that way. As soon as one thinks of God in terms of love one senses this marvel of love that unites the Son and the Father both in the eternal unity of the single God and over the separation of time, space and the Cross.

God is love and nature is necessity, but this necessity is, through obedience, a mirror of love. Likewise, God is joy, and creation is affliction, but it is an affliction resplendent with the light of joy. Affliction holds the truth of our condition. Those who would sooner see the truth and die rather than

16 Jn 20:11–18.

live a long and happy existence under an illusion, will alone see God. One must want to go towards reality; then, expecting to find a corpse, one meets an angel who says, "He is risen."[17]

The only source of clarity perspicuous enough to illuminate affliction is the Cross of Christ. Whatever the era, whatever the country, wherever there is someone afflicted, the Cross of Christ is the truth of it. Any man who loves the truth enough not to run into the depths of falsehood to flee from the countenance of affliction has a share of the Cross of Christ, no matter his creed. If God had been willing to deny Christ to the men of a specific country or era, we would recognise this by one sure sign, that there would be among them no affliction. We know of nothing like this in history. Everywhere where there is affliction, there is the Cross, obscured, but present to anyone who chooses truth rather than falsehood, love rather than hate. Affliction without the Cross is hell, and God did not put hell on earth.

Conversely, the very many Christians who do not have the strength to recognise and worship the blessed Cross in each affliction have no share in Christ. Nothing better shows the weakness of faith than the ease with which, even among Christians, as soon as one speaks of affliction, the problem is sidestepped. Whatever might be said about original sin, the will of God, or Providence and its mysterious plans, which nevertheless one believes one can try to divine, and any kind of future compensations in this world and the next, all this either conceals the reality of affliction or else is of no use. One thing alone allows consenting to true affliction, it is the contemplation of the Cross of Christ. There is nothing else. It is enough.

A mother, a wife, a fiancée who know that the one they love is in distress
371 and can neither help him nor join him would at least want to undergo sufferings equal to his so as to be less separated from him, so as to be relieved of the very heavy burden of powerless compassion. Whoever loves Christ and pictures him on the cross should experience a similar relief in the midst of affliction.

By reason of the essential link between the Cross and affliction, a state does not have the right to detach itself from all religion except on the absurd hypothesis that it had succeeded in eliminating affliction. By still greater reason it has no right to do so when it is itself producing the ones afflicted. Criminal justice cut off from any kind of connection to God has a truly

17 Allusion to Lk 24:1–12.

infernal quality. Not due to verdicts that are wrong or punishments that are excessively harsh, but independently of all that, in itself. It is sullied by contact with defilements of every kind, and having nothing with which to purify them becomes itself so sullied that the worst criminals can yet be debased by it. Contact with it is hateful for anyone who has any integrity and wholesomeness to him; those who are rotten find even in the punishments it imposes a kind of contentment still more horrible. Nothing is pure enough to bring purity into the places reserved for crime and punishment except Christ, he who was a convict under common law.

But since it is only the Cross that is needed by states and not the complications of dogma, it is disastrous that the Cross and dogma should be linked by so strong a link. This link has taken Christ away from his brothers the criminals.

The idea of necessity as the subject common to art, science and every kind of work is the gateway through which Christianity can enter profane life and penetrate it through and through. For the Cross is necessity itself coming into contact with the lowest and the highest parts in ourselves, with bodily sensibility by the evocation of physical suffering, with supernatural love by the presence of God. Consequently all the varieties of contact the intermediate parts of our being can have with necessity are involved in this.

There is not, there cannot be, in whichever domain, any human activity which does not have the Cross of Christ as its supreme and secret truth. No activity can be separated from the Cross of Christ without decaying, or withering like a shoot cut from a vine. We see this happening before our eyes, today, without understanding it, and we wonder wherein our evil lies. Christians understand even less than others because, knowing that these activities 372
date from well before Christ, they are incapable of realising that the Christian faith is their lifeblood.

If we understood that the Christian faith, under veils that let through its illumination, bears flowers and fruits at all times and in all places where there are men who do not hate the light, this difficulty would not stop us.

Never since the dawn of history, except for a certain time during the Roman empire, has Christ been as absent as now. The ancients would have judged as monstrous this separation of religion and social life which even the majority of Christians today find natural.

The lifeblood of Christianity must be made to flow everywhere in social life; but it is nevertheless made above all for the solitary being. The Father is in secret and there is no secrecy more inviolable than affliction.

There is one question which has absolutely no meaning, and of course no answer, that normally we never pose, but which in affliction the soul cannot help from ceaselessly calling out with the monotonous continuity of moaning. This question is: why? Why are things this way? The afflicted naïvely asks it of men, of things, of God, even if he does not believe in him, of no matter what. Why precisely must he have nothing to eat, or be worn out with fatigue and harsh treatment, or should soon be shot, or be sick, or be in prison? If someone explains to him the causes of the situation in which he finds himself, which is in any case rarely possible given the complexity of the mechanisms at work, this will not be an answer for him. For his question, why, does not mean: by what cause, but: to what purpose? And of course one cannot point him to any purposes. Unless one were to fabricate some fictitious ones, but such fabrication is not a good thing.

The strange thing is that affliction in others does not prompt this question, except sometimes, though not always, in those who are very close. At most it is posed at some point without much thought. But the one who falls into affliction, in him this question takes hold and does not ever stop calling out. Why. Why. Why. Christ himself asked it, "Why have you forsaken me?"[18]

The why of the afflicted admits no answer, because we live within necessity and not within purposiveness. If there were purposiveness in this world, the place of the good would not be in the other world. Every time we ask
373 the world for purposiveness, it denies it to us. But to know that it denies it to us, one has to ask for it.

It is only affliction that makes us ask for it, and also beauty, for the beautiful gives us so keenly the feeling of the presence of a good that we look for a purpose without ever finding one. The beautiful also makes us ask: Why? Why is this beautiful? But rare are those who are capable of raising this why in themselves for hours at a time. The why of affliction lasts for hours, days, and years; it ceases only through exhaustion.

He who is capable not only of crying out, but also of listening, hears the answer. The answer is silence. It is that eternal silence for which Vigny bitterly reproached God; but he had no right to say what the just man's response to this silence would be, because he was not a just man. The just man loves. He who is capable not only of listening but also of loving hears this silence as the speech of God.

18 Mk 15:34.

Creatures speak with sounds. The speech of God is silence. God's secret speech of love cannot be anything other than silence. Christ is God's silence.

There is no tree like the Cross, there is also no harmony like the silence of God. The Pythagoreans recognised this harmony in the bottomless silence that eternally surrounds the stars. Necessity here below is the vibration of God's silence.

Our soul is constantly making noise, but there is a point in it which is silence that we never hear. When God's silence enters our soul, pierces it and joins this silence which is secretly present in us, we have from then on our treasure and our heart in God; and space opens before us like a fruit which is split in two, for we are seeing the universe from a point situated outside space.

There are only two routes possible for this operation, to the exclusion of all others. There are only two prongs piercing enough to enter into our soul this way, these are affliction and beauty.

One might be tempted to weep tears of blood when thinking of affliction crushing so many of the afflicted who are unable to make any use it. But considering it coldly, the waste here is no more pitiable than the waste of the beauty of the world. How many times does the light of the stars, the sound of the waves, or the silence of the hour before dawn come offering themselves in vain to the attention of men? Not paying attention to the 374
beauty of the world is perhaps a crime of ingratitude so great that it deserves the punishment of affliction. Admittedly it does not always receive it, but in that case it is punished by the penalty of a mediocre life, and in what way is a mediocre life better than affliction? For that matter, even in the case of great misfortune, the life of such beings is probably always mediocre. Insofar as one can make conjectures about sensibility, it seems that the evil which is within a being might protect him against evil which assails him from without in the form of pain. It must be hoped this is so, and that God has mercifully reduced to very little such useless suffering for the bad thief. It is indeed so, and indeed that is the great temptation contained in affliction, since the afflicted always has the opportunity to suffer less by consenting to become bad.

It is only for the one who has known pure joy, if only for a minute, and thus has known the savour of the world's beauty, for they are the same, it is for that one alone that affliction is something that tears him apart. At the same time it is only that one who has not deserved this punishment. But

also, for him it is not a punishment, it is God himself who takes his hand and squeezes it a bit hard. For if he remains faithful, then in the depths of his own cries he will find the pearl of God's silence.

Oeuvres complètes IV:1

Weil began this essay in Marseilles in April 1942 and finished it in Casablanca in May. It is perhaps the most personal of the essays Weil wrote for her friend, Father Perrin. Its topic is theodicy or the explanation of why an omnibenevolent God appears to permit evil in the world. Rather than an apology, Weil argues for the very necessity of evil so-called, which she calls affliction, as the condition for the possibility of an existence independent from God, which God in his love created for us.

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